

# Furs Along the Yukon: Hudson's Bay Company — Native Trade in the Yukon River Basin, 1830-1893\*

KENNETH COATES

When the news of the discovery of gold in the Yukon River basin became widespread, people around the world rushed to their maps to locate the site of the northern bonanza. The distance of the region from any major population base and the virtually total lack of public knowledge about the physical characteristics of the new land led, not surprisingly, to the assumption that the Yukon was almost uninhabited, the home perhaps of several hundred Indians and a region totally isolated from the nineteenth-century world. This perception, unfortunately, has been difficult to dispel, and the belief remains that Yukon history commenced with the mining activities of George Carmack, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charlie along Rabbit Creek in August 1896.<sup>1</sup> Such a view has obscured a rich and important segment of the history of the Yukon, an era in which the region, through the aegis of the fur trade, was incorporated into the wider North American economy.

In recent years, the fur trade and the attending social and economic implications for Canadian development have been subjected to increased historical inquiry. Focusing primarily on the role of natives in the exchange and their relations with the European traders, historians have been re-examining the validity of traditional interpretations of the reputed insatiable native demand for European trade goods, Indian re-

\* The author would like to thank Professor R. A. J. McDonald, Department of History, University of British Columbia, for his detailed and useful commentary on this paper.

<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to this rather broad statement. The most comprehensive, but by no means complete, study of the pre-Gold rush era is A. A. Wright, *Prelude to Bonanza* (Sidney, B.C.: Gray's Publishing, 1976). Morris Zaslow's *The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870-1914* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971) covers this period, but the work is rather thin on the Yukon fur trade. A better work, one which incorporates the pre-Klondike period with later developments, is Gordon Bennett, *Yukon Transportation: A History*. Canadian Historic Sites Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History, no. 19 (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1978). See also Ken Coates, *The Northern Yukon: A History*, Manuscript Record Series #403 (Parks Canada, 1979) for an examination of one region.

action to competitive trade and the function of trade in native diplomacy. Through these studies, historians have elevated the Indians from the acquiescent role to which they have traditionally been assigned, and have emphasized instead the crucial and positive position maintained by the natives in their early contact with the Europeans.<sup>2</sup> This paper, a study of the structure and content of the fur trade of the Yukon River basin before the Klondike Gold Rush, is an attempt to assess the early economic development of the Yukon and, more specifically, to study native-European exchange in one of the last areas of initial contact between aboriginal residents and Europeans in North America.

This region, comprising the Porcupine River basin and the Yukon River watershed above its junction with the Porcupine, bounded on the south by the Coast and St. Elias Mountains and on the east by the Mackenzie and Richardson ranges, is definable as a geographic unit. Protected, if that is the correct word, from European expansion from the east by physical impediments, the area was easily accessible only via the long and shallow Yukon River, an ingress controlled, but not exploited, by the Russian American Fur Company, a Russian fur trading concern in nominal control of what is now Alaska from the late eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The upper Yukon River basin was one of the last subarctic areas of North America to be explored by Europeans, and hence provides one of the final examples of initial cultural contact between natives and whites. Unlike other areas of Canada, where fur traders were not only the first to expand, but where they enjoyed a substantial period of unchallenged hegemony, the Yukon experience was characterized by a comparatively brief time of fur trade exclusiveness, with missionaries, scientists, surveyors and miners following soon after the traders. This mingling of European endeavours, and the subsequent competition for native time

<sup>2</sup> Western Canadian examples of this historiographical trend include A. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); A. Ray and D. Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); R. Fisher, *Contact and Conflict* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1978); J. Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla* (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1974). The re-examination is, of course, much wider. Recent eastern Canadian examples include L. Upton, *Micmacs and Colonists* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1979), and B. Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1976). For an excellent recent American example, see Gary Nash, *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974). Arthur Ray, "Fur Trade History as an Aspect of Native History," in Ian Getty and Donald Smith, eds., *One Century Later: Western Canadian Reserve Indians Since Treaty 7* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1978) is an excellent "state of the art" piece on the historiography of the fur trade.

<sup>3</sup> For a history of the Russian firm, see S. B. Okun, *The Russian-American Company*, trans. Carl Ginsburg (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951).

and talents, meant that the mechanisms and impact of native-white relations would assume major importance in the economic and social life of the upper Yukon River basin before the Klondike Gold Rush.

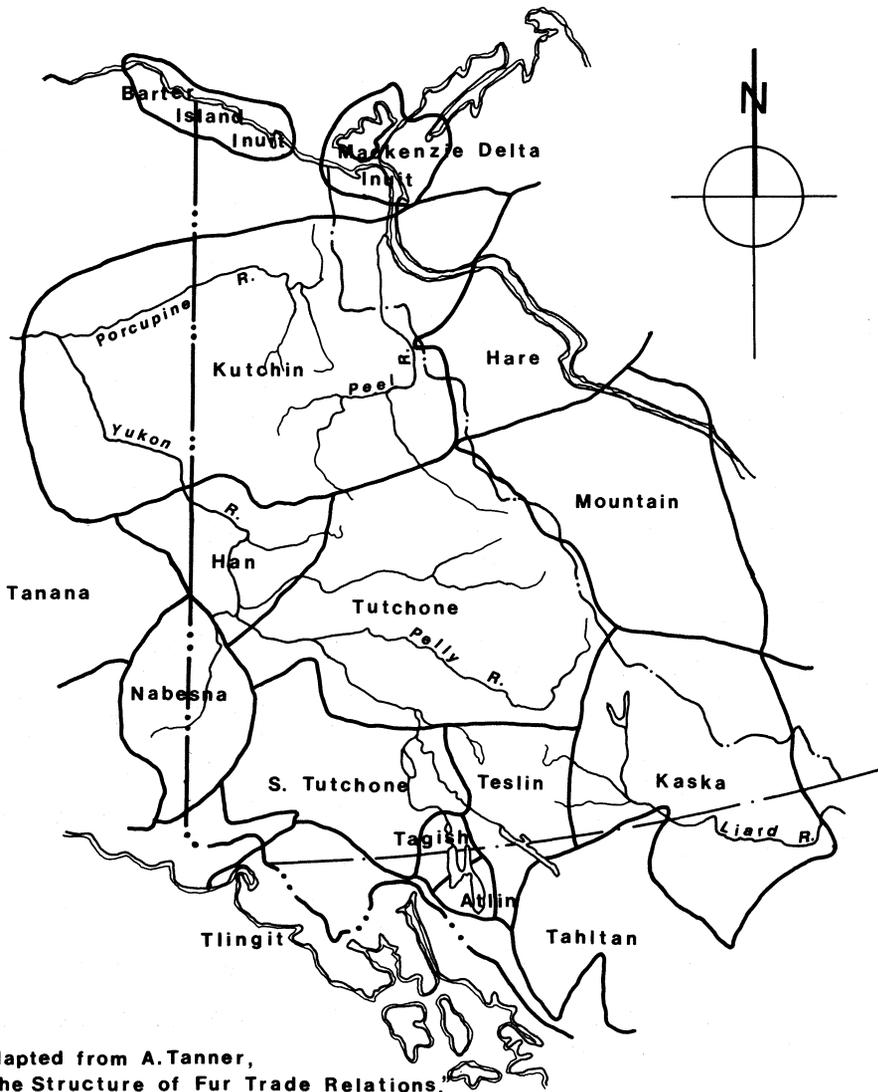
If mountain barriers and difficulties of navigation along the Yukon River provide geographic and economic rationales for dealing with the region as a unit, Athapaskan tribal structure offers further justification for such a focus. Four principal native groups, the Kutchin, Han, Northern and Southern Tutchone, as well as two smaller groups, the Tagish and the Teslin (Inland Tlingit), inhabited the upper Yukon basin. The external habitats of these Indians adhered very closely to the boundaries of this study, with only the eastern bands of the Kutchin Indians extending outside of the precise confines of the area being examined. Of these groups, only the Kutchin, Han and Northern Tutchone had extended and regular contact with Europeans in this period, although in the decade preceding the Gold Rush increasing numbers of white travellers found their way into the lands of the Southern Tutchone and the Tagish. Throughout this era, the major focus for white activity was the northern half of the region. This paper will, of necessity, centre on that area.

The first Europeans to breach the eastern barriers were the employees of the Hudson's Bay Company. Undertaking a vigorous territorial expansion following its 1821 merger with the North-West Company, this fur trading organization attempted to enlarge its operations to the west of the Mackenzie River.<sup>4</sup> The firm's eventual success in reaching the Yukon River basin marked the commencement not only of native-white contact in the area but of a trade that was to continue for almost a half-century.

The examination of this trade, however, cannot begin with the first European incursion into the area, for the extent and content of pre-contact intertribal exchange and the institutions developed to facilitate that trade had important implications for European expansion and subsequent trading arrangements. Pre-contact trade evolved initially to allow for the exchange of commodities between regions. In the Yukon River basin, this saw the Tlingit Indians of the Pacific Northwest Coast carrying such goods as fish oil, shell ornaments and dried fish inland, where they were traded with the Athapaskan Indians for animal hides, moccasins and copper.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Kutchin of the northern interior

<sup>4</sup> Ken Coates, "Furs Along the Yukon: Native-Hudson's Bay Company Trade in the Yukon River Basin, 1830-1893" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1980), pp. 25-57.

<sup>5</sup> W. Ostenstat, "The Impact of the Fur Trade on the Tlingit" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1976), p. 24.



Adapted from A. Tanner, "The Structure of Fur Trade Relations," unpublished MA thesis, U.B.C., 1966, and P. Usher, "Canadian Western Arctic; A Century of Change," *Anthropologica*, Vol. 13, No. 1/2.

map by Bruce MacKinnon

MAP 1  
*Tribal Distributions in the Northwest*

travelled regularly to the Arctic coast and traded with the Barter Island Inuit.<sup>6</sup> Although the pre-contact exchange was primarily between regions, serving to exchange coastal products for the produce of the interior, additional trade was conducted among the Yukon basin natives to balance out inequalities of supply of certain valued items. Thus, the Yukon Flats Kutchin traded surplus dried salmon for commodities such as caribou hides which, due to animal migration patterns, were not readily available in their area.<sup>7</sup>

To expedite the exchange, to provide continuity and, in at least one case to prevent the interruption of trade during periods of intertribal conflict, a number of institutional arrangements evolved. Between such traditional rivals as the Kutchin and the Inuit, formal partnerships were established, with leading men from each group co-ordinating the trade. These arrangements were strictly for trading purposes, and the dispassionate nature of the accords ensured that trade would continue even in times of hostilities.<sup>8</sup> Partnerships also served as the focus for trade between the coastal Tlingit and the interior peoples. Tlingit parties would annually cross through the mountains from the coast and, at an appointed time and place, would meet their inland counterparts. Each Tlingit group was led by a house leader who would decide all conditions of trade with the inland partners and conclude plans for the following year. The militarily superior Tlingits clearly dominated the exchange.<sup>9</sup>

Such institutions were not required to facilitate intertribal exchange. Extensive trade was conducted between the various Kutchin bands, but the sib (clan) structure of this tribe, which cut across band lines, ensured frequent and non-hostile exchange. Trade was conducted through funeral potlatches, gift exchange or simple exchange, with leading men

<sup>6</sup> A. Tanner, "The Structure of Fur Trade Relations" (unpublished MA thesis, University of B.C., 1966), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19. For a detailed discussion of patterns of trade among the Kutchin in the pre-contact period, see Susan Ugarenko, "The Distribution of the Kutchin and their Spatial Patterns of Trade, 1700-1850" (unpublished MA thesis, York University, 1979), chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>8</sup> J. Franklin, *Thirty Years in Arctic Regions* (New York: D. W. Evans, 1860), p. 448; A. Simpson, *The Life and Travels of Thomas Simpson* (Toronto: Baxter Publishing, 1963), pp. 119-20; C. Osgood, *Contributions to the Ethnography of the Kutchin*, Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 14 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 132; Tanner, "Fur Trade Relations," p. 33. The Kutchin, Osgood points out, had a taboo forbidding the killing of an Inuit trading partner during war.

<sup>9</sup> Ostenstat, "The Impact of the Fur Trade," pp. 25-30; Catherine McClelland, *My Old People Say* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), pp. 502-09.

acting as intermediaries for their bands.<sup>10</sup> Whereas all intertribal trade had been institutionalized to ensure continuity, exchange within a tribal entity was conducted without the benefit of special arrangements.

Before the arrival of Europeans on the periphery of the region, native exchange, though regular, was not extensive and involved primarily the exchange of surplus items. When Europeans began to trade on the outer fringes of the natives' trading networks, however, the extent and content of the exchange was dramatically altered. The institutional arrangements established for pre-contact trade remained in use and facilitated the dispersal of the recently available European commodities. But the maintenance of trading connections depended not upon their traditional importance but upon the availability and cost of the desired goods. The importance of access to a dependable supply of European manufactures was apparent when the Tlingit Indians, the first native group in the area to secure a reliable source, were able to expand their earlier inland operations. Acting through intermediary tribes, including the Han and the Tutchone, the Tlingits were eventually able to draw much of the upper Yukon basin into their trading hinterland.<sup>11</sup> Such pre-eminence, however, was conditional upon other native groups being cut off from a supply of European goods. When the Hudson's Bay Company expanded along the lower Mackenzie River after union with the North-West Company, the eastern bands of the Kutchin Indians now found themselves with a consistent supply of European goods and were able to set themselves up in a strong middleman position vis-à-vis the western Kutchin and the Han Indians.<sup>12</sup> Although the pre-contact institutions remained in existence after the arrival of European traders on the periphery, the actual trading networks proved to be highly variable, with considerable reorientation

<sup>10</sup> Tanner, pp. 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the Tlingit trade, see Ostenstat; C. McClellan, "Culture Change and Native Trade in the Southern Yukon Territory" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California-Berkeley, 1950).

<sup>12</sup> When the Hudson's Bay Company reached Peel River, they found a number of items of Russian origin in the possession of the local Indians, indicating the west-to-east flow of trade. See for example Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter cited as HBCA), D. 5/6 fol. 341, Bell to Simpson, 20 December 1843. For evidence of the eastern Kutchin serving as middlemen, see Public Archives of Canada (hereafter cited as PAC), MG 30, D39, Burpee Papers, "Letters of John Bell" (unpublished manuscript), p. 27. Of particular relevance here is Ugarenko, "The Distribution of the Kutchin," chapters 2 and 3. Ugarenko hypothesizes that indirect trade with the Russians began in the eighteenth century. While exchange contact through intermediaries was likely, the probable scale of the trade was small and sporadic until the formation of the Russian American Company at the turn of the century. Pp. 29-33.

occurring as native groups moved to exploit new sources of European commodities.

These native trading patterns and institutions were crucial to the Hudson's Bay Company's expansion and, equally important, to the nature of trading relations between the firm and the people of the Yukon River basin. Following the discovery of the Colville River by Thomas Simpson and Peter Warren Dease in 1837,<sup>13</sup> the Hudson's Bay Company launched an extensive, two-pronged exploration of the region west of the Mackenzie River. In both cases, the effort was to be impeded by the existence of functioning native trade networks, as the Indians, realizing the value and importance of maintaining a monopoly over a source of supply or a trading area, attempted to prevent the Hudson's Bay Company's expansion. The Indians were, to some degree, in a more advantageous position than the Hudson's Bay Company, for they were not only able to limit or restrain access to the fur reserves of the Yukon River basin but also possessed, through the Chilcat (Tlingit) Indians, an alternative source of supply of European manufactures.

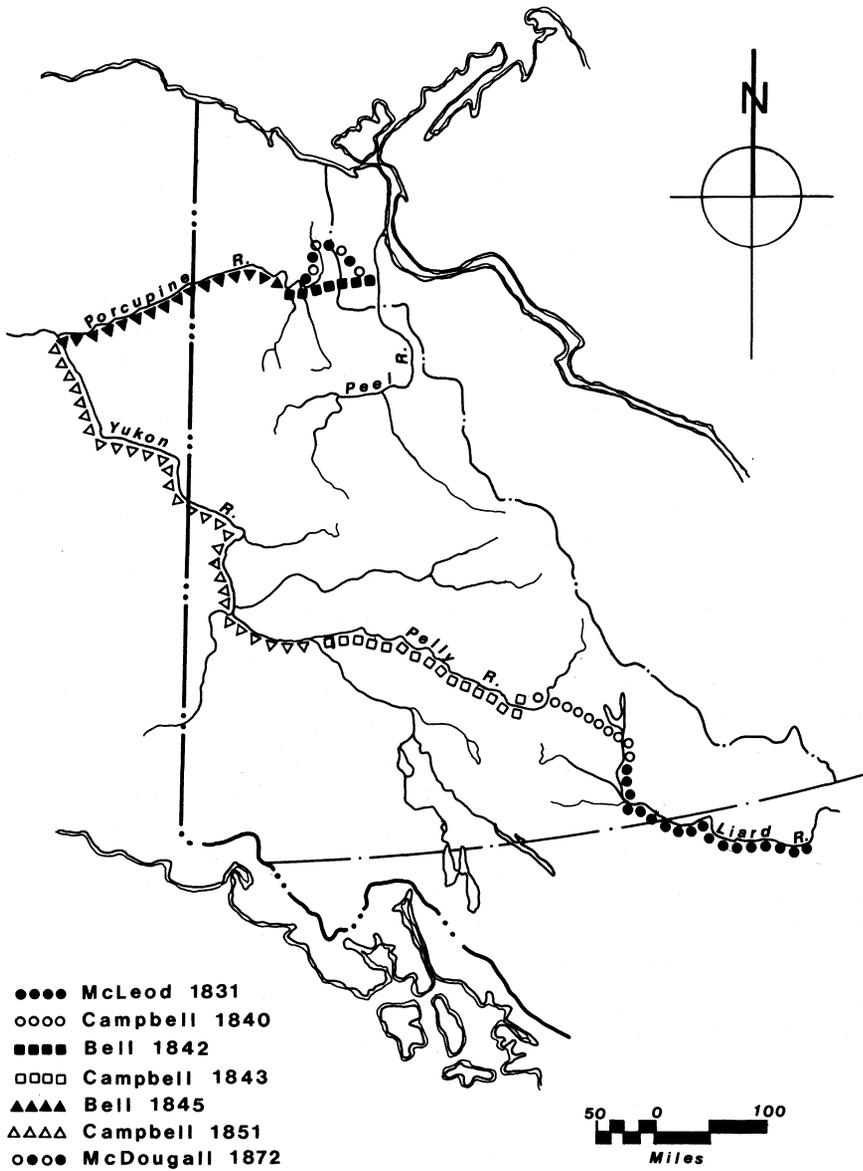
The first branch of the Company's effort to expand westward centred on Peel's River Post, opened by John Bell in 1840 following his initial, and unsuccessful, attempt to cross the Richardson Mountains.<sup>14</sup> The Peel River Kutchin, only recently established in a lucrative middleman position, did their utmost to hinder the Hudson's Bay Company's efforts. The natives offered virtually no assistance to Bell in his quest, frequently misrepresenting the difficulty of the terrain and the concomitant problems of transport across the mountains<sup>15</sup> and, after agreeing on several occasions to guide the Company's men, abandoned them long before they had reached their objective.<sup>16</sup> On at least two occasions, Indians from west of the Richardson Mountains, anxious to encourage Hudson's Bay Company expansion into their region, reached Peel's River and provided

<sup>13</sup> Simpson and Dease's travels are described in A. Simpson, *The Life of Thomas Simpson* and Thomas Simpson, *Narrative of the Discoveries on the North Coast of America* (London: Richard Bentley, 1843). The Hudson's Bay Company's reaction to the unexpected suggestion from Simpson and Dease that there was great fur trade potential to the west of the Mackenzie River is found in HBCA, D.4/23, fol. 305, Simpson to McPherson, 31 May 1838.

<sup>14</sup> A. Cooke and C. Holland, *The Exploration of Northern Canada* (Toronto: Arctic History Press, 1978), p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> PAC, MG30, D39, Burpee Papers, "Letters of John Bell," p. 28; HBCA, B200/b/11, fol. 15, McPherson to Simpson, 30 November 1838; Ugarenko, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> HBCA, D.5/7, fol. 250, Bell to Simpson, September 11, 1842; HBCA, D.5/8, fol. 421, Bell to Simpson, 10 August 1843. See also S. Krech, "The Eastern Kutchin and the Fur Trade, 1800-1860," *Ethno-History* 23/3 (Summer 1976), pp. 213-35.



map by Bruce MacKinnon

MAP 2

*Hudson's Bay Company Exploration Routes 1831-1872*

flattering descriptions of the prospects for trade in the area.<sup>17</sup> Encouraged by these reports and prodded by Hudson's Bay Company Governor George Simpson to continue his efforts, Bell finally succeeded in crossing the mountains in 1842, only to be abandoned by his guide shortly thereafter.<sup>18</sup> The problem was finally solved in 1845 when, on Governor Simpson's suggestion, Bell hired Indians to assist him who knew nothing of the area to the west and who had no self-interest conflicting with the purposes of exploration. In that year, Bell succeeded in reaching the "Youcon" or Deep Water River, believed at the time to be the Colville.<sup>19</sup> Although the Peel River Kutchin were ultimately unsuccessful in their attempt to hold the Hudson's Bay Company in the Mackenzie River basin, their interference and failure to provide the anticipated assistance postponed for seven years the Hudson's Bay Company's expansion into the Yukon River watershed.

With Bell's discovery of a major new river and the opening of an area somewhat wistfully believed to be a "New Athabasca," the Company moved quickly to incorporate the region into its system. A small outpost, Lapierre's House, was built on the west side of the Richardson Mountains in 1846, and the following year Alexander H. Murray led a contingent of men to the junction of the Porcupine and Youcon Rivers, where they erected Fort Youcon.<sup>20</sup> This Hudson's Bay Company expansion did not permanently disrupt the intertribal trading patterns of the pre-expansion era. The eastern bands of the Kutchin Indians were, it is true, displaced from a valuable trading position, but their pre-eminence was taken up by the western bands around the new post. What had occurred was not the destruction of intertribal networks but merely a "leap-frogging" of one link in the chain. The western bands, formerly dependent on other native groups for supplies, now possessed a secure source of European manufactures. Aware of the implications of the Hudson's Bay Company's expansion, the western natives abandoned their former role as fur trappers and assumed a new one as fur traders.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> HBCA, D.5/5, fol. 377, Lewes to Simpson, 20 November 1840; HBCA, B.200/b/13, fol. 14, Bell to Lewes, 26 August 1840.

<sup>18</sup> HBCA, D.5/7, fol. 250, Bell to Simpson, 11 September 1842.

<sup>19</sup> HBCA, D.4/31, fol. 93, Simpson to Bell, 3 June 1844; HBCA, D.5/14, fol. 212-215, Bell to Simpson, 1 August 1845.

<sup>20</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/22, fol. 15, Murray to McPherson, 30 November 1847; A. H. Murray, *Journal of the Yukon 1847-48*, ed. J. Burpee (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1910), pp. 35-45.

<sup>21</sup> HBCA, D.5/34, fol. 71, Anderson to Simpson, 10 July 1852. For a discussion of the changing networks, see Ugarenko, pp. 138-42.

The second phase of the Hudson's Bay Company's westward expansion, that led by Robert Campbell along the Liard and Pelly rivers, also encountered difficulties with native trading networks, but with markedly different consequences. Campbell's initial activities, which centred on the sparsely populated and fur-poor regions around Frances Lake and the upper Pelly River, were largely unattended by difficulties with the Indians.<sup>22</sup> As he extended his operations toward the Yukon River, however, he brought the Company's trade into conflict with the interior trade of the Chilcat (Tlingit) Indians and their inland partners. As had happened to Bell in the north, Campbell was forced to conclude one of his explorations prematurely when his native tripmen refused to continue, ostensibly because of their fear of "savage" Indians downstream.<sup>23</sup> When, after five years of procrastination and mismanagement, Campbell was finally able to open Fort Selkirk at the junction of the Lewes (Yukon) and Pelly rivers, he was to find that the long-anticipated returns were not forthcoming.<sup>24</sup>

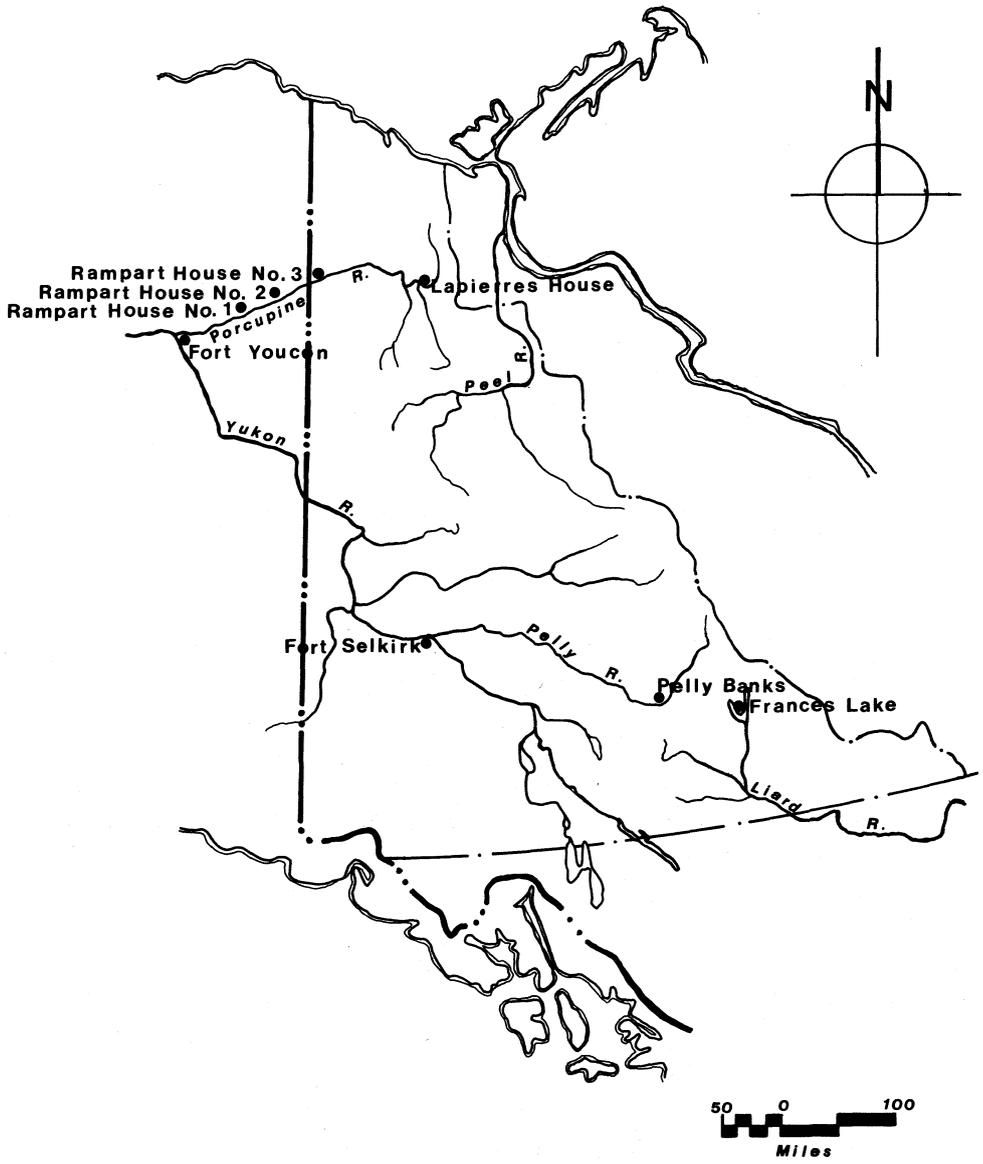
Continuing a practice started in the pre-contact period, Chilcat traders regularly travelled inland to trade, outbidding the Hudson's Bay Company for the local Indians' furs and preventing Campbell from achieving a reasonable return on the Company's investment. On 21 August 1852 a group of Chilcats, returning from a trading foray, arrived at Fort Selkirk a short time after Campbell had dispersed his men on a variety of duties. The natives proceeded to ransack the fort, with Campbell and the remaining two men making a hasty escape.<sup>25</sup> While much of the blame for this particular incident must fall on Campbell for his unwise actions before the affair, the attack should be seen as a manifestation of a larger conflict. Unlike Bell, whose activities overturned trading arrangements of relatively short duration, Campbell had, by his expansion to Fort Selkirk, attempted to interfere with a much more established network. The Hudson's Bay Company officer himself noted that the Chilcats' knowledge of the area and the interior natives' customs and languages ensured that the

<sup>22</sup> Campbell's career is discussed in C. Wilson, *Campbell of the Yukon* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970); and A. Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-77.

<sup>23</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/19, fol. 11, Campbell to Lewes, 25 July 1843.

<sup>24</sup> In the five years at Fort Selkirk, Campbell was never able to achieve a profit on a single season's trade, let alone pay off accumulated debt. HBCA, D.5/34, fol. 71, Anderson to Simpson, 10 July 1852. For a reinterpretation of Campbell's career, see Coates, pp. 67-89. See also the Pelly Banks and Fort Selkirk journals in PAC, MG19, A25 and MG19, D13.

<sup>25</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/29, fol. 170, Campbell to Anderson, 4 November 1852; Wright, pp. 72-73; PAC MG19, D13, Journal of Occurrences at the Forks of the Pelly and Lewes, July 3-9.



map by Bruce MacKinnon

MAP 3

*Hudson's Bay Company Trading Posts in the  
Yukon River Basin, 1839-1893*

coastal Indians maintained their supremacy.<sup>26</sup> Other more practical considerations, including reliability of supply and price level, also worked to solidify the allegiance of the inland natives to their coastal partners. The Hudson's Bay Company traders were hindered in their opposition by the inconsistent receipt of supplies at their post, a situation caused by the transportation difficulties associated with the turbulent waters of the West Branch of the Liard River, and by the fact that they were required to adhere to the Mackenzie River District tariff, a pricing structure which compared unfavourably to that offered by the Tlingits.<sup>27</sup> The coastal Indians, participants in the competitive maritime trade, offered consistent supply, comparable quality and lower prices which, even more than the traditional trading networks, ensured the Chilcats' supremacy.<sup>28</sup>

The forced removal from Fort Selkirk restricted the Hudson's Bay Company's trade to Fort Youcon, and until 1869 and the arrival of American fur traders this single post served as the focus for trade in the upper Yukon River basin.<sup>29</sup> It is important to point out, however, that the limitation of exchange, both before and after the destruction of Fort Selkirk, was determined primarily by the Hudson's Bay Company and not solely by the actions of the natives. It had initially been intended that the Fort Youcon traders would continue Bell's explorations to the mouth of the "Youcon" River. The realization that the new post was well within Russian territory and that Russian traders were reputed to be a short distance downstream, coupled with the 1839 agreement between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian American Fur Company under which the former firm promised to refrain from trading on Russian territory, convinced the British traders to postpone any further examination of the river below the post.<sup>30</sup> Fort Youcon, although unofficially acknowledged to be outside of British territory, was another matter. The remu-

<sup>26</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/29, fol. 236, Campbell to Gentl. in Charge R. District, 18 October 1851.

<sup>27</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/24, fol. 60, Campbell to McPherson, 24 July 1850; HBCA, D. 5/22, fol. 162, Campbell to Simpson, 22 April 1848.

<sup>28</sup> Ostenstat, "The Impact of the Fur Trade." For a discussion of Tlingit trade along the Stikine River, see S. Johnson, "Baron Wrangel and the Russian America Company" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Trade was not allowed at Lapierre's House, and the traders were instructed to direct the Indians to take their furs to either Fort Youcon or Peel's River. HBCA, B.220/b/29, fol. 34, Anderson to Peers, 25 January 1852.

<sup>30</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/22, fol. 31, McPherson to Murray, 3 February 1848, HBCA, D.4/42, fol. 140, Simpson to Murray, 13 December 1850; HBCA, D.4/38, fol. 133, Simpson to McPherson, 22 November 1848.

nerative trade from that post and the great potential the Company's men believed the area possessed ensured that financial considerations would win out over mere technicalities. As the location of the fort had never been accurately or officially delineated, the Hudson's Bay Company was able to stay at this location in a state of feigned naiveté.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, however, this combination of diplomatic and economic considerations prevented the Hudson's Bay Company from undertaking any additional expansion of trade from their Fort Youcon base until 1863.

Similar concerns were cited by the Hudson's Bay Company's superior officers as reasons for discouraging Robert Campbell's attempts to expand southward from Fort Selkirk. Always reluctant to settle down to the business of trading furs, he repeatedly petitioned the Company for permission to explore towards the Pacific Coast, with a view to bringing in supplies for Yukon via the Chilcats' trading route.<sup>32</sup> Although Governor Simpson initially granted Campbell permission to proceed, he quickly withdrew his authorization.<sup>33</sup> The reversal was based on the belief that if Campbell's explorations proved successful, the firm would be opening a trail inland from the coast which, along with allowing the Hudson's Bay Company to transport their supplies, would also permit competitive traders to reach the interior.<sup>34</sup> The decision was taken instead to redirect Campbell's efforts and he was authorized to continue explorations of the land between Forts Selkirk and Youcon, and was also instructed to investigate the area between the Yukon and Mackenzie rivers.<sup>35</sup> Although the Chilcats' assault on Campbell's post was ultimately responsible for the Company's retreat from the southern Yukon, the limits of the Hudson's Bay Company's trade and expansion were set more by official policy and diplomatic considerations than by the actions of the Indians. Although the expulsion from Fort Selkirk led to some initial reservations as to the future prospects of the Yukon trade, such doubts were quickly resolved in favour of a continuation of the Company's activities.

<sup>31</sup> HBCA, D.5/22, fol. 664, Campbell to Simpson, 14 September 1848; HBCA D. 5/25, fol. 590, Campbell to Simpson, 28 August 1849; HBCA, D.5/28, fol. 47, Campbell to Simpson, 6 April 1850.

<sup>32</sup> HBCA, D.5/22, fol. 664, Campbell to Simpson, 14 September 1848; HBCA, D.5/25, fol. 590, Campbell to Simpson, 28 August 1849; HBCA, D.5/28, fol. 47, Campbell to Simpson, 6 April 1850.

<sup>33</sup> HBCA, D.4/71, fol. 241, Simpson to Campbell, 20 June 1850; HBCA, D.4/36, fol. 201, Simpson to Campbell, 15 December 1844.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/29, fol. 254, Colville to Anderson, 26 June 1851.

Unlike Campbell's past, Fort Youcon soon proved to be a highly profitable establishment, returning profits of as high as £4,200 in 1866.<sup>36</sup> Actual return to the Hudson's Bay Company was limited by two important factors, the high transportation costs across the Richardson Mountains and the fact that the Yukon trade operated on a seven-year cycle. This cycle meant that from the time goods were purchased in London until the furs traded for that merchandise reached England, seven years had lapsed. While this time difference necessitated the financing of the trade on credit and inhibited the Company's profits, the substantial trade at Fort Youcon (consistently among the top three posts of the Mackenzie River District) ensured the continued profitability of that establishment. As discussed earlier, the trade functioned primarily through intertribal trading networks, with the Kutchin Indians near the junction of the Porcupine and Yukon rivers serving as intermediaries for other "distant" natives. The "Fort Youcon Indians," profiting greatly from their enhanced middleman status, jealously guarded their position, threatening or even attacking any bands which attempted to break their monopoly and trade directly with the company.<sup>37</sup>

The Hudson's Bay Company, suffering initially from an insufficient outfit and a lack of specific items in greatest demand, attempted to use native institutions, as they perceived them, to control the trade. Aware of the function of partnerships in intertribal exchange, the Company's traders erroneously assumed that by forging an alliance with a band's trading chief they could then dictate terms of trade to the entire group.<sup>38</sup> In times of shortages at the post, the officers would trade highly valued goods, particularly guns and beads, with only these "principal men." The trading chief, however, did not enjoy the status assigned to him by the Hudson's Bay Company traders. Among the Athapaskan Indians, the trading chief was selected by a group of natives solely to represent their interests, initially in dealings with other native groups and later in trade with Europeans. The arrangements concluded by the "chief" were not

<sup>36</sup> For an analysis of changing profit patterns, returns and expenses, see Coates, pp. 90-176.

<sup>37</sup> Ugarenko suggests that efforts by the Fort Youcon Indians to establish a middleman position were unsuccessful. Her study, unfortunately and not altogether logically, stops in 1850, and there is no analysis offered of the trade at Fort Youcon after that date. Evidence from subsequent years reveals that the efforts were greeted with considerable success. HBCA, B.200/b/32, fol. 129, Hardisty to Gentl. in Charge R. District, 12 August 1855; HBCA, B.200/b/33, fol. 15, Ross to Council, 29 November 1858; HBCA, B.200/b/33, fol. 103, Ross to Lockhart, 26 March 1861.

<sup>38</sup> Tanner, pp. 37-44.

binding upon the band and the Hudson's Bay Company officers often found that after giving preferential treatment to a chief, the trade of the remaining natives would not have been secured.<sup>39</sup> When the natives lacked alternatives to the Hudson's Bay Company, as at Fort Youcon, however, the trading chief institution served reasonably well.

That the Hudson's Bay Company's officers would so seriously misjudge the importance and function of a native institution is somewhat surprising given the firm's long and extensive history in the fur trade and, more directly, in dealing with Athapaskan Indians. The trade most analogous to the Yukon situation was that conducted along the Mackenzie River following the merger of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North-West Company, but that was under monopoly conditions. Although the firm had had ample experience in highly competitive trade, the officers in direct control of the Yukon posts had been trained and had worked primarily in the Hudson's Bay Company-dominated Mackenzie River basin after 1821. As a result, on several occasions they attempted to impose conditions and regulations on the trade which were inappropriate for Fort Youcon. For example, the Company had a long-standing policy that goods in highest demand, such as beads and guns, were to be traded only for the most valuable furs. Lacking a complete complement of supplies in the first years, the Hudson's Bay Company traders decided to forgo this policy temporarily. What they had not anticipated was that for the natives, the same relationship had become the "standard of trade," meaning that they refused to trade their finest furs for anything but guns and beads.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in 1865, William Hardisty, Chief Factor in charge of the Mackenzie River District, imposed an immediate restriction upon the granting of credit to the Indians. Although the change was reportedly implemented in the rest of the district, there is evidence to suggest that the policy was continued at Fort Youcon.<sup>41</sup> The natives, it seems clear, were unwilling to accept any attempt by the Hudson's Bay Company to impose new structures on the Fort Youcon exchange. This conflict between the firm's district-wide policies and attitudes and the Fort Youcon situation was largely a manifestation of the more competitive nature of the Yukon River trade.

<sup>39</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/23, fol. 35, Murray to McPherson, 12 November 1848; HBCA, B.200/b/19, fol. 183, Hardisty to Anderson, 6 July 1852.

<sup>40</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/23, fol. 35, Murray to McPherson, 12 November 1848.

<sup>41</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/35, fol. 94, Circular from W. Hardisty, 10 March 1865. In 1869, 1080 "Made Beaver" in debt was granted at Fort Youcon. HBCA, B.240/d/13, Fort Youcon Accounts. No date was given for an official revocation of the policy.

Before examining the nature of that competition and its effect on the Yukon trade, it is first necessary to examine the native response to European trade goods, for it was that response which determined the impact of competition.<sup>42</sup> The Fort Youcon trade shows that the natives had relatively simple, specific requirements for European goods. Through their intertribal trading networks, they had long and continuous exposure to a wide range of European commodities, and when the Hudson's Bay Company expanded into their area they did not rush to trade for new and exotic items but rather restricted their trade to a few standard items, primarily guns, ammunition, tobacco, vermilion and beads. Other items, including blankets, were purchased on a more tentative basis, as the Indians appeared reluctant to accept a rapid alteration in their material culture.<sup>43</sup> As their demands fell within relatively narrow limits, it is perhaps not surprising that they insisted on rigid adherence to strict specifications. The natives, in one instance, refused to purchase an entire order of beads due to their unacceptable size and colour.<sup>44</sup> They did not hesitate to make their demands known to the Hudson's Bay traders, and the latter's correspondence is replete with appeals to district officers to increase the post's allotment of certain trade goods.<sup>45</sup> The cultural conservatism of the Yukon basin natives ensured that they had very specific and rigid demands. If these requirements were not met by the Hudson's Bay Company, the natives would not hesitate to resort to alternative sources of supply to secure the required goods.

The evidence presented thus far points to the natives' disinclination to accept the dictates of the Hudson's Bay Company and, indeed, their

<sup>42</sup> This issue has drawn considerable attention in the past. H. Innis, *The Fur Trade of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 388; W. T. Easterbrook and H. Aiken, *Canadian Economic History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 38-39; A. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*; Ray and Freeman, "Give Us Good Measure."

<sup>43</sup> For example, no more than 145 blankets were brought to Fort Youcon in a single year. At the same time, there were several thousand natives trading, directly or indirectly, with the Hudson's Bay Company. See Coates, "Furs Along the Yukon," for an analysis of native purchases in this period.

<sup>44</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/29, fol. 183, Hardisty to Anderson, 6 July 1852; HBCA, B.200/b/32, fol. 130, Hardisty to Gentl. in Charge "R" District, 1 November 1855.

<sup>45</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/30, fol. 63, Anderson to Council, 30 March 1854; HBCA, E. 37/10, fol. 95, Anderson to Simpson, 25 March 1855 are but two of numerous examples. Another important consideration to bear in mind is that it required at least four years to make a substantial alteration in the Fort Youcon or Fort Selkirk outfits. Orders had to be sent first to Fort Simpson, where surplus supplies were seldom available, and from there to York Factory, where outfits for the interior posts were provided. This arduous, time-consuming procedure severely limited the traders' ability to respond quickly to native demands.

major role in determining the extent and content of the Yukon River fur trade. No area so clearly demonstrates the Indians' ability to manipulate and even control the fur trade as does their exploitation of competition among European traders. Through their extended, if indirect, contact with Europeans, the Indians had developed a considerable understanding of the whites' motivation for trading furs, and hence were aware of the implications of competition for traders' profits and, more importantly, for tariffs and prices. Throughout the pre-Gold Rush era, the Indians displayed a sensitivity toward the complexities of competitive trade and a willingness to exploit competition.

That the natives would take advantage of alternatives towards the end of the period, when numerous white traders were active in the area, is not surprising. It is, however, highly illustrative to note that in 1847, when the Hudson's Bay Company first expanded to Fort Youcon, the natives moved quickly to exploit the Europeans' fear of competition. At this time, the sole competition with the Hudson's Bay Company in the entire Yukon River basin was a small outpost of the Russian American Fur Company (RAFC) at Nulato, about 700 miles downstream from the Hudson's Bay Company establishment. Beginning virtually the moment Alexander Murray arrived at the junction, however, the natives reported the "activities" of the Russians, claiming that they had ascended to the site of Fort Youcon the previous year and that they were planning to return that season.<sup>46</sup> Murray, who realized that the post had been built within Russian territory, feared the consequences of the Russians discovering the location of the post and was afraid that competition would destroy the viability of his trade.<sup>47</sup> On a regular basis, the natives continued to provide Murray with "information" on the actions of his rivals, claiming at various times that the Russians had outfitted their boat with a cannon,<sup>48</sup> that they were offering a lower tariff and dispensing many gifts,<sup>49</sup> and that they were spreading inflammatory rumours about the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>50</sup>

That the natives passed on so much information to the firm's traders is not a reflection of the activities of the RAFC, for none of the reports appear to have been based on fact, but displays instead the Indians'

<sup>46</sup> Murray, *Journal of the Yukon, 1847-1848*, pp. 45-69.

<sup>47</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/23, fol. 9, Murray to McPherson, 24 June 1849.

<sup>48</sup> HBCA, B.240/a/1, fol. 76, Youcon Journal, 24 May 1848.

<sup>49</sup> HBCA, B.240/a/1, fol. 45, Youcon Journal, 27 November 1847.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

appreciation of the value of European trade rivalry. Even though distance meant that only minimal competition existed, the natives made sure that the Company's traders operated under the assumption that the Russians posed a serious threat to the Fort Youcon trade. The Yukon trade before the post-1869 expansion of the Americans reveals that the natives were capable of "manufacturing" a competitive situation in order to raise tariff levels and lower prices.<sup>51</sup>

The encouragement of competitive trade by the natives elicited a number of responses from the Hudson's Bay Company traders, not all of them favourable to the Indians. The traders' fears of Russian expansion and competition did ensure that they would respond quickly to native requests in order to prevent their desertion. In particular, the Company moved rapidly to meet the specific commodity demands of the Indians, requesting on one occasion that the firm's Pacific Division collect some coastal shells and send them to Fort Youcon, and calling frequently for an enlargement in the outfit of certain goods in high demand.<sup>52</sup> In one area, the adjustment of the tariff, the natives were consistently unsuccessful. The Company's refusal to act was based on the realization that the high costs of trading in the area could only be met profitably if the tariff remained unaltered and, secondly, that if the exchange rates were lowered the Peel River Indians, trading in the Mackenzie River District but regularly informed of conditions to the west, would leave that region and resort instead to Fort Youcon.<sup>53</sup> In 1862, the Hudson's Bay Company was finally provided with tangible evidence that Russian competition did indeed exist, when a servant of the RAFC, apparently in a minor scouting expedition, arrived at Fort Youcon.<sup>54</sup> Believing that the event signalled the intent of the Russian firm to expand upstream and basing its actions on the oft-repeated native descriptions of the nature of Russian trade, the Hudson's Bay Company decided to expand downstream to head off the competition. Already well within Russian territory, the Company's officers chose to send boats downriver annually to trade rather than open a new post below Fort Youcon. This had the effect of cutting the Fort Youcon Indians out of a considerable portion of their

<sup>51</sup> Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade* and Ray and Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure* both provide numerous examples of natives manipulating the trade.

<sup>52</sup> HBCA, E.37/9, fol. 40, Anderson to Colville, 16 March 1852. Due to mismanagement within the Mackenzie River District, the beads were greatly delayed in reaching Fort Youcon.

<sup>53</sup> HBCA, B.220/b/37, fol. 277, Hardisty to Council, 30 November 1870.

<sup>54</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/34, fol. 136, Jones to Hardisty, 23 June 1863.

middleman trade.<sup>55</sup> Although for fifteen years, from 1847 to 1863, the “manufacturing” of competitive circumstances had worked to the natives’ benefit, the culmination of the effort was a Hudson’s Bay Company attempt to head off what they perceived to be a serious threat and, consequently, the undermining of the local Indians’ trading position.

The natives did not rely solely on the exploitation of “competitive” trade to press their demands. Indeed, they found a number of means of encouraging the Hudson’s Bay Company to comply with their requests. The vulnerability of the Company’s establishment, an isolated island never inhabited by more than twelve employees among several thousand natives, was readily apparent to the Hudson’s Bay Company men, and the possibility of attack bore heavily on their minds. On a number of occasions, the natives spoke of attacking the post unless more favourable conditions of trade were offered and, in the aftermath of Campbell’s Fort Selkirk fiasco and the Hudson’s Bay Company’s refusal to retaliate, the Indians’ threats became even more incessant.<sup>56</sup> It is highly illustrative of the nature of native-white relations in this period to note that on one occasion, when native threats were particularly numerous, the senior officer of the Mackenzie River District directed the Fort Youcon trader to visit all the natives in his area and explain the economic advantages of a continuation of Hudson’s Bay Company trade at Fort Youcon.<sup>57</sup> No appeals to loyalty were suggested, merely a recitation of the function and value of the Company’s trade.

Not all native actions against the firm were of such a belligerent tone. The primary means used to press demands was to withhold or restrict supply, a tactic resorted to whenever the Hudson’s Bay Company was unable to provide the quantity or quality of goods requested.<sup>58</sup> The effectiveness of these boycotts should not be underestimated, for they proved to be a very powerful means of ensuring rapid Hudson’s Bay Company action. Restriction of trade was not adopted solely to force a modification of the firm’s outfit or prices, for on one occasion one group of Indians

<sup>55</sup> V. Stefansson, *Northwest to Fortune* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1936), pp. 219-20; HBCA, B.200/b/34, fol. 57, Jones to Hardisty, 10 November 1863, HBCA, B.200/b/37, fol. 28, Hardisty to McDougall, 29 January 1869.

<sup>56</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/32, fol. 24, Hardisty to Anderson, 15 October 1853; HBCA, B.200/b/33, fol. 15, Ross to Council, 29 November 1858.

<sup>57</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/32, fol. 42, Anderson to Hardisty, 1 January 1854.

<sup>58</sup> Regarding Fort Selkirk, see PAC, MG19, D13, Pelly and Lewes Forks Journal, vol. 1, 30 September 1849. Fort Fort Youcon, see HBCA, E.37/10, fol. 95, Anderson to Simpson, 25 March 1855.

was able to force the removal of a Hudson's Bay Company officer, Strachan Jones, by refusing to trade until the man left the post.<sup>59</sup>

While the natives were able to exert considerable influence over the introduction of European trade goods, they were unable to prevent the arrival of one common European import — disease. A scarlet fever epidemic, introduced by Hudson's Bay Company boat crews, swept through the Yukon River basin in 1865. No exact figures indicating the severity of the outbreak are available, but the Company's officers estimated that between 170 and 200 of the "Fort Youcon Indians" had died.<sup>60</sup> The disease was not limited to those natives in direct contact with the European traders but soon spread throughout the region. The 1865 epidemic, while one of the first and likely the most severe, was not the last, and on several occasions before the Gold Rush various diseases to which the natives had little or no natural immunity swept through the area.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the most startling aspect of the epidemics was not their severity, for native populations elsewhere in North America had been decimated by imported diseases, but rather the apparently cavalier attitude of the fur traders toward the transmission of illness, an attitude particularly prevalent in the 1865 episode. On this occasion, the Hudson's Bay Company boat crews, themselves wracked by disease and unable to row their vessels, had had to float virtually the entire distance from Fort Simpson to Peel's River Post. Although well aware that they were carrying a potentially harmful disease into previously unexposed areas, the crew members continued on to Fort Youcon. One trader commented at the time that it was unfortunate for the Indians that the crew had been able to complete their appointed task. From the Company's perspective, it was essential that the voyage be completed in order to maintain the men and the trade at Fort Youcon. The traders, although aware of the source of the illness, nonetheless blamed the Indians for the severity of the outbreak, claiming that their laziness and stupidity contributed to

<sup>59</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/35, fol. 99, Hardisty to Jones, 1 April 1865. J. Dunlop, an apprentice clerk, was also forced to leave after incurring the displeasure of the Indians, HBCA, B.200/b/33, fol. 15, Ross to Council, 29 November 1858.

<sup>60</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/36, fol. 43, McDougall to Hardisty, 25 September 1865.

<sup>61</sup> Not all illness in this period was brought in by the traders. See HBCA, B.200/b/29, fol. 184, Hardisty to Anderson, 31 May 1852. Other illnesses are documented in HBCA, B.200/b/36, fol. 189, McDougall to Gentl. in Charge, 27 October 1868; A. Balikci, *Vunta Kutchin Social Change* (Ottawa: Northern Co-ordination and Research Centre, 1963), chapter 4; M. Westbrook, "A Venture into Ethnohistory: The Journals of Rev. C. C. Sim," *Polar Notes*, no. 9 (May 1969), p. 41.

their own sickness.<sup>62</sup> The introduction of disease into the Yukon River basin was to be a major feature of native-white contact in this period. At no time did a single epidemic match the severity of the outbreak of scarlet fever, but over the next thirty years a series of less serious, more localized illnesses were to afflict the natives. Surprisingly, the Hudson's Bay Company was not financially harmed as a result of the epidemics. The majority of the firm's trade was by this time originating far to the west, and the tribes of the lower Yukon River appear to have been insulated by distance from the full impact of the diseases.

This first quarter century of direct native-white trade in the Yukon River basin saw no serious European competition with the Hudson's Bay Company. Through the use of intertribal trading networks, the artificial creation of competition, intimidation and trading boycotts, however, the natives were able to overcome the apparent monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company and secure more favourable conditions for trade.<sup>63</sup> The transfer of Alaska from Russia to the United States in 1867 quickly altered the nature of native-white relations in the Yukon River basin.

American traders moved onto the lower reaches of the Yukon River almost as soon as the purchase of Alaska was announced. Two years later the "Yankee" traders reached Fort Youcon, encouraged by a sympathetic U.S. government. Responding to American reports that the Hudson's Bay Company was trading well within U.S. territory and was competing with American traders, the government sent Captain Raymond of the U.S. Navy in 1869 to survey the Yukon River and to ascertain the location of Fort Youcon.<sup>64</sup> His "discovery" of the fact that the post was on U.S. soil led to the removal of the Hudson's Bay Company to British (but soon to be Canadian) territory and, more generally, to a reorientation of the Yukon River trade. The Hudson's Bay Company opened Rampart House along the Porcupine River in 1870, then burned it down the same year and moved further upstream to Lapierre's House.<sup>65</sup> The

<sup>62</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/35, fol. 186, Hardisty to Council, 30 July 1866; HBCA, B.200/b/36, fol. 42, Flett to Hardisty, January 1866.

<sup>63</sup> Throughout the pre-1869 period, the Company maintained consistent and acceptable profits, and was satisfied with the prospects for the trade.

<sup>64</sup> B. Lain, "The Fort Yukon Affair, 1869," *Alaska Journal* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1977), p. 14; Charles Raymond, "Reconnaissance of the Yukon River," in United States Government, *Compilation of Narratives of Explorations in Alaska* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900).

<sup>65</sup> Balikci, pp. 34-36; HBCA, B.200/b/37, fol. 272, Hardisty to Smith, 30 November 1870; HBCA, B.200/b/40, fol. 5, Hardisty to McDougall, 10 March 1871.

following year the firm opened a new Rampart House a short distance upstream from the first and remained at that site until 1890.<sup>66</sup> That year, the discovery that this post was also on American soil led to its abandonment and the construction of a new post just inside Canada, an establishment which remained open for only three years, as the Hudson's Bay Company withdrew from the area completely in 1893.<sup>67</sup> The American traders were no less erratic, frequently opening and closing posts, forming new companies or merging operations. By 1874, however, the Alaska Commercial Company had come to dominate the American portion of the trade and was running regular steamboat excursions along the Yukon River to supply its string of posts.<sup>68</sup> This fluid, often confusing framework provided a stark contrast to the comparatively stable pre-1869 fur trade, but the alterations did not seriously affect the natives of the Yukon River basin.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the impact of expanding American competition, it is necessary briefly to assess the changing character of the Hudson's Bay Company in the years after 1860. There had been a tendency among historians to treat Europeans and, more specifically, George Simpson, who died in 1860, the Hudson's Bay Company had European organizations as given or fixed entities. Under Governor conducted a vibrant, expanding fur trade.<sup>69</sup> With his death, however, control of the trade passed into the hands of more conservative individuals, men who placed less emphasis on the pursuit of furs and who were intent, particularly after 1870 and the transfer of Rupert's Land to the Canadian government, upon the diversification of the firm's activities.<sup>70</sup> A conflict of sorts developed between the new leadership of the firm, both in London and in Canada, and the Simpson-trained traders still active in the field, who anxiously worked to prevent a contraction of trade and, at least in the Yukon River basin, argued for an expansion of operations. James McDougall's discovery of a new pass across the Richardson Mountains in 1873<sup>71</sup> provides evidence not only of the conflict

<sup>66</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/43, fol. 597, Camsell to Wrigley, 29 March 1890.

<sup>67</sup> HBCA, A.74/1, fol. 38, Chipman to Camsell, 7 January 1893.

<sup>68</sup> S. D. Johnson, *Alaska Commercial Company, 1868-1940* (San Francisco, 1940); G. Bennett, pp. 17-19.

<sup>69</sup> John S. Galbraith, *The Little Emperor: Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976).

<sup>70</sup> G. Sealey, "The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1870-1910" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1967), pp. 30-36.

<sup>71</sup> See Coates, pp. 131-32.

between the two groups but also of the growing conservatism of the Company hierarchy. W. Hardisty, Chief Factor of the Mackenzie River District, argued that a cart trail should be built along the new route and that, by running steamers along the Yukon and Porcupine Rivers, the firm could import all supplies needed for the northern trade by way of the Pacific Coast and could readily expand operations along the upper Yukon River.<sup>72</sup> This suggestion would have placed the Hudson's Bay Company in a more favourable competitive position vis-à-vis the Americans, but was vetoed by Commissioner Donald A. Smith and the London Committee.<sup>73</sup> The firm resorted instead to a more passive role, content to hold on to the limited trade garnered at Rampart House and, by maintaining a post to the west of the Richardson Mountains, to prevent American encroachment on the lucrative Mackenzie River trade. It is important to view the Hudson's Bay Company's activities in the era of direct American competition in light of the firm's growing conservatism, for it helps to explain the Company's comparatively weak trading position and consistently unaggressive stance in the Yukon River basin after 1869.

The initial response of the natives to the arrival of the Americans was not favourable, particularly among those directly attached to Fort Youcon. The Indians refused to trade furs or even provisions with the interlopers and made frequent pledges of allegiance to the Hudson's Bay Company. Indeed, as the Company withdrew up the Porcupine, a substantial portion of the Fort Youcon Indians followed.<sup>74</sup> This animosity toward Americans was not general throughout the region, and applied almost exclusively to the Indians residing near Fort Youcon who had been eliminated from a highly profitable middleman position by the Americans' arrival. The Hudson's Bay Company's success in retaining native support, initially attributed to the quality of the firm's goods and the fairness of the Company's trade,<sup>75</sup> appears to have been due more to the presence of James McDougall, a long-time Fort Youcon trader. McDougall had earned the personal allegiance of many natives, and when he later left the area a substantial number of Indians left to trade with the Americans. The natives' demonstrations of support for the Hudson's Bay Company which had accompanied the expulsion from Fort Youcon proved to be short-lived, and as the economic advantages of the Ameri-

<sup>72</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/40, fol. 54, Hardisty to Smith, 6 August 1872.

<sup>73</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/41, fol. 4, Smith to Hardisty, 9 October 1873.

<sup>74</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/38, fol. 15, McDougall to Hardisty, 3 January 1870.

<sup>75</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/37, fol. 255, Hardisty to Council, 2 August 1870.

can trade became more apparent the Indians quickly dropped their superficial allegiance to the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>76</sup>

Due to the difficulties of supply inherent in the Yukon's location and the aforementioned problem of the Peel River Indians being constantly aware of the conditions of trade to the west of the Richardson Mountains, the Hudson's Bay Company was unable to adopt any markedly different competitive techniques to maintain its trade with the natives. The Company did, however, expand existing competitive measures, including the granting of greater credit and the offering of relatively long-term employment to the natives in an attempt to tie the Indians to the firm.<sup>77</sup> For the most part, however, the Company was forced to rely on the attraction of certain of its trading goods, especially tobacco and, increasingly, blankets, which remained in great demand throughout the Yukon River basin and which were not obtainable through the Americans.<sup>78</sup>

The "Yankee" traders, driven by internal competition as well as by trading conflict with the Hudson's Bay Company, utilized a number of techniques to attract native traders. Initially, these followed the rather traditional lines of granting generous gratuities, lowering the prices of their goods, offering better rates for the Indians' furs, travelling to trade directly with native bands, and incorporating their competitors' trade goods into their outfits.<sup>79</sup> But, finding these methods only marginally successful, the Americans resorted to a series of less conventional techniques, focussing primarily on the use of natives to encourage other Indians to alter their trading patterns. Adapting a method long used with considerable success by the Hudson's Bay Company, some Americans hired native "trippers" to travel to distant tribes and solicit trade.<sup>80</sup> Later

<sup>76</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/40, fol. 74, Hardisty to Sinclair, 1871; HBCA, B.200/b/37, fol. 272, Hardisty to Smith, 30 November 1870.

<sup>77</sup> Coates, pp. 152-75.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* The Hudson's Bay Company continued to trade their traditional merchandise throughout this period, including their highly valued blankets and tobacco. Their American competitors, for the most part, imported U.S. goods, many of which were viewed by the natives as inferior. It caused great consternation among the Hudson's Bay Company traders when, in 1881, the "Yankees" began trading a number of English goods at prices substantially lower than those offered by the Hudson's Bay Company. HBCA, B.200/b/43, fol. 30, Counsell to Grahame, 23 March 1881.

<sup>79</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/37, fol. 272, Hardisty to Smith, 30 November 1870; HBCA, B.200/b/39, fol. 35, McDougall to Hardisty, 20 December 1873; HBCA, B.200/b/40, fol. 120, Hardisty to Wilson, 30 March 1875.

<sup>80</sup> PAC, MG29, A11, vol. 1, fol. 607-08, MacFarlane Papers, McDonald to MacFarlane, 10 January 1877.

attempts to compete with the Hudson's Bay Company saw the Alaska Commercial Company set up Indians as "free traders" in the shadow of Rampart House, supplying them with a generous complement of goods and encouraging their protégés to offer debt and better prices in order to secure trade.<sup>81</sup>

Whatever the measure adopted, one factor remained constant throughout. Each attempt to attract native traders away from a European rival worked to the economic benefit of the natives, offering a new trading source, alternative employment, a wider range of goods or a more advantageous pricing arrangement. The natives were quick to exploit the very favourable circumstances, altering their trade frequently to take advantage of the best possible conditions. Those natives who remained "loyal" to the Hudson's Bay Company throughout this competitive period did not do so out of blind allegiance to the firm. For the natives, the maintenance of trading links with the Hudson's Bay Company was not unattended with benefits such as the extension of debt and the possibility of employment, and there was always the opportunity, frequently taken advantage of, to resort to competitive traders whenever conditions warranted.

The commencement of the American fur trade, beyond the politically dictated expulsion of the Hudson's Bay Company from Fort Youcon, did not significantly alter the structure and content of the fur trade in the Yukon River basin. The Hudson's Bay Company lost a lucrative trade position and was eventually forced to withdraw from the area, but its role along the Yukon was quickly assumed by American traders. Similarly, the Fort Youcon Indians were displaced from their profitable middleman position. There is, however, considerable evidence to suggest that intertribal trade continued long after 1869, aiding the dispersal of valued Hudson's Bay Company and American trading goods among native groups cut off from direct access to either of the trading groups.<sup>82</sup> The arrival of the Americans had occasioned the introduction of a limited number of trade goods into the area, but for the most part exchange

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, fol. 817-18, McDonald to MacFarlane, 1 January 1881; *Ibid.*, fol. 819-20, Sim to McFarlane, 4 January 1881.

<sup>82</sup> Evidence for this is twofold. There is literary evidence of Indians throughout the Yukon River basin continuing to trade with the Hudson's Bay Company after 1869. See W. Ogilvie, *Klondike Official Guide* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1898), p. 48. Other evidence is provided by the fact that the Hudson's Bay Company's outfit for certain items, including tobacco and blankets, remained high and even increased after 1869, suggesting that such goods were being passed throughout the region through intertribal trade. Coates, pp. 152-75.

centred on traditional commodities. In the latter period, as with the era of Hudson's Bay Company "monopoly," the fur trade was characterized by native control. The fur trade was, moreover, an economic order which placed the natives in a position of preeminence. It valued, indeed depended upon, at least superficially, a maintenance of the natives' traditional way of life. This is not to suggest that the fur trade did not change after 1867; rather it is to argue that the nature and the impact of the exchange did not undergo a significant transformation following the arrival of the Americans.

Most of the Europeans entering the region before the Gold Rush saw the natives as peripheral to their primary purpose. This did not mean that there was no interaction with the natives or that they did not have a major impact on Indian life. Unlike the fur traders, who recognized that their economic well-being lay in the perpetuation of traditional native culture, the other whites, excluding the missionaries, treated the Indians as parenthetical elements of northern society, a group to be resorted to only when dictated by necessity.

Two groups in particular, prospectors lured north in the search for gold and Herschel Island whalers, had extensive contact with the natives prior to the Gold Rush. It was these two groups which had the most severe impact on the fur trade and which suggested the transformation in the native economy that was to accompany the Klondike Gold Rush. The first miners to investigate the mineral prospects of the upper Yukon River basin, L. McQuesten, A. Harper and A. Mayo, arrived in 1872. Initial prospects proved unfavourable and all three men quickly turned to the fur trade, allying themselves with the Alaska Commercial Company.<sup>83</sup> By 1886, however, an estimated 200 miners were active in the region, working primarily in the vicinity of the Alaska/Canada boundary near Fortymile and Birch Creek. Ten years later, on the eve of the Gold Rush, several thousand miners were actively searching for gold along the tributaries of the Yukon River. Economically, the rise of mining provided new opportunities for some natives, with the miners paying up to \$8 per day for Indian labourers, a sum which far exceeded their likely earnings in the fur trade.<sup>84</sup> Such prospects were, however, open only to those natives living close to the mines. At the same time the prospectors constituted serious competition for the natives, as many were forced to

<sup>83</sup> Bennett, *Yukon Transportation*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>84</sup> PAC, MG20, B22, Ogilvie Papers, file 4, Bompas to Lieutenant Governor, 3 December 1891.

turn temporarily to fur-trapping, and very occasionally trading, in order to finance their mining activities. As the number of miners continued to increase, serious and wide-ranging changes in the region's economic structure became apparent. Whereas the American traders had previously, of necessity, focussed exclusively on the fur trade, the miners now provided them with an alternative market, one with greater consumption and more comprehensive demands for trade goods. The general result was a declining emphasis on the fur trade by the Yankee traders and a re-orientation of their outfits to accommodate the miners' demands.

For forty-five years following the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company, alcohol had been effectively banned as an item of trade in the area. The miners, however, insisted that such beverages be brought in or, failing that, they were not averse to brewing their own, a skill they readily passed on to the natives. Missionaries in the area quickly recognized the detrimental effects of native contact with the miners and frequently petitioned the Canadian government for assistance in preventing the sale of liquor to Indians.<sup>85</sup> Although the arrival of the miners brought temporary prosperity to some natives, their long-term impact was socially deleterious. The miners served as a very disruptive influence, allegedly "purchasing" young girls from their native fathers, and encouraging gambling.<sup>86</sup> Of greatest importance, however, was the miners' swift and effective displacement of the fur trade, which eliminated the major source of native control of Indian-white contact.<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, the American whalers who began operating off Herschel Island in 1890 further disrupted the culture of the Yukon River basin natives. Although the whalers' impact on the coastal Inuit is well recognized,<sup>88</sup> less well known is the effect of the Herschel Island activities on

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, PAC, RG18, A1, R.C.M.P. Papers, vol. 314, file 177, Bompas to Minister of the Interior, 18 June 1896; Wright, pp. 280-81.

<sup>86</sup> S. A. Archer, *A Heroine of the North: Memoirs of Charlotte Selina Bompas* (London: Macmillan Company, 1929), pp. 137-38; H. A. Cody, *An Apostle of the North* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1908).

<sup>87</sup> The fur trade, of course, was not eliminated and it still provided a reasonable source of income for those natives relatively close to the trading posts. Importantly, however, whites in the area no longer depended solely or even primarily on the trade, no longer actively solicited the trade of distant natives, and hence had fewer dealings with and less reliance upon the Indians. Inspector Charles Constantine, "Report of Inspector C. Constantine, 10th October, 1894," in *Report of the Commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police Force, 1894* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1895), pp. 74-75.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Usher, "Canadian Western Arctic, a century of change," *Anthropologica* 13, no. 1/2 (1971), pp. 169-83; I. Warner, "Herschel Island," *Alaska Journal* 3, no. 13 (1973), pp. 130-43; A. Stevenson, "Whaler's Wait," *North* 15, no. 5 (1963), pp. 24-31; A. Stevenson, "Herschel Haven," *North* 15, no. 6 (1963), pp. 24-32.

the interior Kutchin. Primarily engaged in whaling, the Arctic mariners quickly discovered that considerable profits were also to be made in the fur trade. Blissfully ignorant of the structure of the exchange which characterized the interior trade of both the Hudson's Bay Company and its American rivals, the whalers resorted to whatever methods were required to attract the natives. In their lust for furs, the whalers traded goods such as alcohol and Winchester repeating rifles, both of which had been banned for trade with the natives by the Canadian government.<sup>89</sup> The social extravaganza which characterized the regular trading sessions at Herschel Island also served as an attractive alternative to the sedate exchange of the interior. The Hudson's Bay Company quickly saw their remaining trade at Rampart House eroded, with the local trader virtually powerless to convince the natives not to resort to the coast.<sup>90</sup> These developments, the expansion of mining activities along the Yukon River and the arrival of the whalers at Herschel Island, both of which occurred in the decade before the Gold Rush, served to disrupt seriously the existing social and economic structure.

Throughout the pre-Klondike era in the upper Yukon River basin, it was the natives' position in the economic order which determined the degree of adaptation or erosion in Indian society and culture. While the fur trade dominated, the natives were able to control both the extent and content of cultural change. Their pre-eminent role in that trade ensured that, through coercion, boycotts or encouragement of competition, the natives were able to exert considerable influence over the activities of the European traders. The fur trade era could be characterized as one of gradual adaptation, with the cultural conservatism of the natives inhibiting rapid acceptance of European trade goods into their material culture. It is important to remember as well that the culture change in this period was not solely an inexorable progression toward the wonders of European civilization, and that the fur trade era provides examples of how the fur trade served to embellish, rather than replace, some cultural forms.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/43, fol. 698, Camsell to Wrigley, 25 March 1891; HBCA, B. 200/b/43, fol. 719, Camsell to Chipman, 11 September 1891.

<sup>90</sup> HBCA, B.200/b/43, fol. 755, Camsell to Chipman, 30 March 1892.

<sup>91</sup> The best example is provided by the expansion in the use of beads, a form of currency among the Athapaskans and an important status symbol, by the Indians following the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company. For a description of the elaborate use of beads, see F. Whympster, *Travel and Adventure in Alaska* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilm, 1966), pp. 224-25.

With the displacement of the fur trade, however, the economic and social position of the natives began to change. The gradual decline in emphasis on furs was offset temporarily by the additional employment opportunities offered by the whites. As the European population increased, the natives were relegated to an increasingly peripheral economic position, a position which was attended with a loss of native ability to influence the actions of the whites. Rather than playing a major and initiating role in Yukon basin society, the natives began to react to European advances. The introduction of alcohol and new commodities by the Herschel Island whalers and the mining community, and the vastly different social environment created by the new groups of Europeans, proved to be attractive lures to the natives. Before the Klondike Gold Rush and the cataclysmic changes which accompanied it engulfed the Yukon River basin, the extent of social disintegration among the natives was fairly limited both in degree of cultural erosion and number of natives affected. Two tribes, the Kutchin and the Han, were directly influenced by either the miners or the whalers, while a small number of the remaining natives had sporadic contact with them. For the most part, the natives were able to capitalize on the alternative opportunities opened to them and were not individually affected economically by the demise of the fur trade. Such temporary prosperity, founded more on a shortage of white labour than on the Europeans' intention to find a new role for the Indians, soon appeared illusory. The pre-Gold Rush era had not seen the demise of traditional native society in the Yukon River basin, but it did contain the seeds of upheaval which, when watered by the influx of thousands of gold-seekers after 1896, threatened a serious displacement of native society.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Two Canadian studies which also argue that the natives were able to use their economic dominance to influence the fur trade and European activities are Ray and Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure* and Robin Fisher's *Contact and Conflict*. A similar argument has been advanced for native-white contact in Colonial America and elsewhere. Regarding the former, see F. Craven, *White, Red and Black: Seventeenth Century Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971) and G. Nash, *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America*. The similarity in experience ends with the natives' fall from economic pre-eminence. The Indians' lack of utility to the whites of colonial America led to their displacement and, in some areas, to their extinction. In the Yukon River basin, the end of the natives' "value" to the Europeans meant that they were shunned and ignored, but not eliminated.