

# Historical Mourning Practices Observed among the Cree and Ojibway Indians of the Central Subarctic

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Paul Hackett, *University of Manitoba*

**Abstract.** Until the mid-nineteenth century the Indians of the Central Subarctic consistently observed two mourning customs upon the passing of a close relative. The first was to destroy or dispose of the personal belongings of the deceased and those of the mourners while providing the corpse with necessary items for the spirit's journey to the afterlife. The second was to cease hunting for one year. In 1846 some fur traders observed unprecedented departures from these customs, due perhaps to the influence of the fur trade, missionaries, or repeated epidemics. Although conditions seem to have favored abandonment, it was not complete. Even into the twentieth century some groups mourned in the traditional way, while others abandoned or modified these practices.

The introduction of Old World disease has long been recognized as critical to the transformation and destruction of aboriginal lifeways in the Americas. The devastation witnessed by the first European visitors has been observed many times over the past five centuries (Crosby 1972; Dobyns 1983). To this has been added an understanding of other effects of repeated epidemics, in particular their impact on aboriginal culture. Native responses such as territorial shifts and fundamental alterations in political structures, spiritual beliefs, warfare patterns, and group composition have been well documented and emphasized in the recent literature (see, e.g., Ewers 1973; Taylor 1977; Martin 1974, 1982; Dobyns 1983; and Vecsey 1983).

Far less attention has been given to the perseverance of aboriginal culture and customs in the face of these epidemics. It was not always the case that the introduction of Old World diseases brought immediate and total change. Rather, sometimes specific customs or beliefs survived for long

*Ethnohistory* 52:3 (summer 2005)

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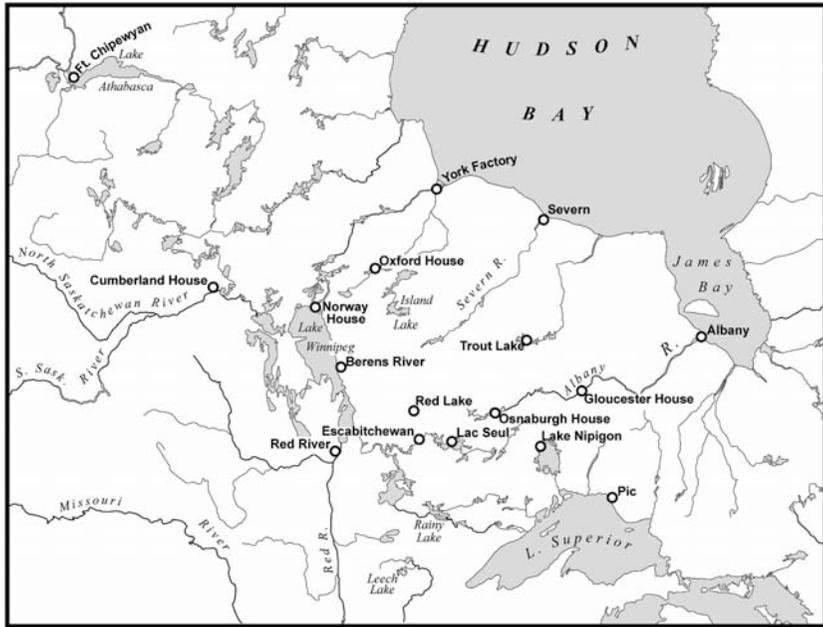


Figure 1. Study area

periods despite the repeated ravages of disease and other forces of change. This essay documents the persistence of a pair of traditional mourning customs among the Cree and Ojibway Indians of the Central Subarctic (fig. 1), in what is now western Canada, up to the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It also examines the first major deviations from these long-standing practices, which did not occur until 1846. This was by no means an insignificant event, for such mourning responsibilities were taken very seriously, and their abandonment may have signaled a change in the nature of some peoples' relationship with the dead.

### The Customs

All cultures maintain some sort of process for dealing with the death of their members. Although the ways in which these funeral rites are carried out vary significantly between societies, according to Mandelbaum (1976: 344) they serve several key practical, personal, and social functions that are universal: they help to dispose of the body; they help the mourners to

reorient themselves following a loss; and they help the group to readjust. If unusual circumstances leave a group with no process for dealing with death, or if an existing process is deemed to be no longer appropriate or feasible, then a new one will be established. In general, such rites are centered on the dead but serve the interests of the living, acting as important social occasions and mechanisms for individuals to diffuse their grief.

On the whole, the mourning practices of the Indians of the Central Subarctic were relatively simple when compared to those found among many other aboriginal societies in North America (Driver 1964: 450). Nevertheless, two related customs were almost universally observed among these people during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first involved the abandonment or destruction of possessions. Historically it was not uncommon among North American Indians for mourners to place a few selected goods with the corpse. For many peoples it was assumed that the deceased would be able to make use of objects such as hunting tools, tobacco, food, and clothing after death (Jenness 1989: 281; Yarrow 1976).<sup>2</sup> Thus, according to S. G. Wright, who served as physician to the Leech Lake Ojibway of northwestern Minnesota in the 1880s, many believed “that there was a spirit dwelling in the article represented by the material article; thus the war-club contained a spiritual war-club, the pipe a spiritual pipe, which could be used by the departed in another world. These several spiritual implements were supposed, of course, to accompany the soul, to be used on the way to its final resting abode” (Yarrow 1976: 95).<sup>3</sup> Wright’s comments were equally appropriate for those living farther north. James Isham, a fur trader who served at York Factory of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) during the mid-eighteenth century, described this practice in his *Observations*:

if one of a family Dies their nearest freind [*sic*] or Ralations Burries them Very oft’n with most of their Effects when Done is;—  
They put a pile of wood Like unto a faggot, round the graves, then they make an offering, putting a painted Stick up, some with a cross hanging a hatchet, Bayonett, or Ice Chissel, or what Else they have on the top, with the sculp of their Enemies, when they go to warr, which no Indians whatsoever takes away. (Quoted in Rich 1949: 93)<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, A. Irving Hallowell (1967: 156), who conducted ethnographic research among the Berens River Ojibway in the 1930s, noted that the non-Christians asked “to be provided (in their graves) with a small kettle, an axe, a knife, and perhaps a gun,” all goods that were essential for the journey to come.

This was not the full extent of this practice, however. Often the dis-

posal of goods among the grief-stricken went beyond placing them with the corpse, to include the actual destruction of the object, a practice perhaps intended more to lessen the mourner's grief than to ease the deceased's way to the hereafter. Moreover, in addition to disposing of the deceased's personal possessions, relatives were also expected to destroy or rid themselves of their own property.<sup>5</sup> Thus, according to the HBC trader Thomas Thomas, writing in 1777, the destruction of personal goods "is their common manner of showing sorrow at the loss of a friend or relation."<sup>6</sup> Writing several decades earlier, Isham observed that, after the death of a close relative, "itt's [*sic*] their common custom to give all away, to other Indians, Even so much as the wear and appearal upon their backs, which is oft'n the occasion of their being greatly in Debt to the English [the HBC]" (Rich 1949: 93–94). Employees of the rival Northwest Company (NWC) witnessed similar behavior. Alexander Mackenzie noted that among the Cree Indians, "the whole of the property belonging to the departed person is destroyed. And the relations take in exchange for the wearing apparel, any rags that will cover their nakedness" (Lamb 1970: 135). Similarly, John McLoughlin explained of the Ojibway of the Boundary Waters region between Fort William and Lake of the Woods that "on Extraordinary occasions, such as the death of friends or Relations, they will throw away every thing they can possibly spare and some time indeed leave them in a manner naked."<sup>7</sup>

Mourners' practice of relinquishing personal property was both widespread and diverse. Thus, on some occasions furs, clothes, and goods were said to have been given to others, while in many other cases they were burned, thrown in a river, or simply abandoned. Likewise, the extent to which the grieving survivors had to rid themselves of their belongings apparently was not uniform either. Many passages in the historical records refer only to the destruction of trading furs or other objects that might be discarded without immediate hardship. At other times, however, it is clear that those in mourning had disposed of all of their personal possessions, down to their clothes. For instance, after his son had died near Lac Seul in 1844, an Ojibway trapper appeared at the post in a desperate situation. "Of course," wrote the HBC trader in charge of the post, "he threw away every thing he had & is entirely naked except a rag of an old rabbit skin blanket to cover his shoulders." While the archival records do not make clear when the child died, such an outpouring of grief in a cold October in northwestern Ontario could have been dangerous had the trapper not had the assistance of the HBC.<sup>8</sup>

A second common mourning practice found in the Central Subarctic required the cessation of hunting for a prolonged period, almost invari-

ably a year. Sometimes simply the trapping of furs for trade was suspended; sometimes all hunting by the mourners stopped.<sup>9</sup> Following the death of the wife of Segewish in 1829 at Lake Nipigon, north of Lake Superior, trader Donald McIntosh commented in his journal that the Indian “resigned himself to gloom & melancholy & could not turn his mind to hunt or anything else,” a reaction that the trader later identified as a general rule among the Indians. Three years later at Oxford House a Cree man came into the post without furs owing to the death of his son, and the post manager felt it necessary to remind his superiors that “such indeed is the invariable custom among Indians for a considerable length of time after the loss of this nature neither parents thinks of doing anything further than bearly [*sic*] finding themselves in food.” Similarly, in 1839 the trader at Osnaburgh House remarked in his journal that “it [is] well known when such happens in an Indian family, [it] puts an end to all exertions in the fur way.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout the region, and beyond, the death of a trapper’s close relative meant the loss of his hunts for a year.

These mourning customs were general among the Cree and Ojibway, and were described consistently by knowledgeable fur traders during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (table 1). However, they also extended across cultural and linguistic boundaries. For instance, both practices were regularly observed among the Athapaskan-speaking Indians living to the north and west of the Cree.<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to Alexander Mackenzie in the late eighteenth century, the Chipewyan Indians “manifest no common respect to the memory of their departed friends, by a long period of mourning, cutting off their hair, and never making use of the property of the deceased. Nay, they frequently destroy or sacrifice their own, as a token of regret and sorrow” (Lamb 1970: 156). While at Fort Chipewyan in 1793–94, Mackenzie met a lodge of Indians whose behavior would have been familiar to any who had spent time with the Cree or Ojibway: They “were absolutely starving with cold and hunger. They had lately lost a near relation, and had, according to custom, thrown away every thing belonging to them, and even exchanged the few articles of raiment which they possessed, in order, as I presume, to get rid of everything that may bring the deceased to their remembrance. They also destroy every thing belonging to any deceased person, except what they consign to the grave with the late owner of them” (Lamb 1970: 251–52).

If the Chipewyan had similar lifestyles to their subarctic neighbors, another nearby tribe whose culture and economy were otherwise different also observed one of these customs. Early in his career the fur trader Charles McKenzie spent time among the sedentary and agricultural Indians of the Upper Missouri before moving on to a long posting among the

Table 1. Mourning practices documented in the Central Subarctic and neighboring regions

Location/Group	Time Period	Practice	Source
Albany Fort	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting & destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.3/a/60: 31; B.3/a/74: 19; B.3/e/7: 8
Bad Lake (near Berens River)	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	HBCA B.16/e/3: 2; B.16/a/3: 2
Boundary Waters	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Destroy furs/goods	PAM MG10 F4, p. 7
Cumberland House	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	Franklin 1823: 52; Houston 1974: 49
Escabitchewan	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	HBCA B.64/a/8: 9d, 15
Fly Lake Post	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.71/a/1: 11
Gloucester House	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting & destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.78/a/18: 1d
Indians of Athabasca	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting & destroy furs/goods	HBCA D.1/13: 43–44; Esau 1986: 95–97
Island Lake	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	HBCA B.93/e/1: 3
Lac La Pluie (Rainy Lake)	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting & destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.105/a/1: 18; B.105/a/7: 71d; B.105/a/13: 10d
Lac Seul	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting & destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.107/a/5: 6; B.107/a/13: 11; B.107/a/20: 13d; B.107/a/23: 8

Lake Nipigon Post	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	HBCA B.149/a/11: 16
Osnaburgh House	Mid 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	HBCA B.155/a/50: 21; Bishop 1974: 210
Oxford House	Mid 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	HBCA B.156/a/13: 50
Pic Post	Mid 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	HBCA B.162/a/4: 36d
Red Lake (Ontario)	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting & destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.64/a/8: 15, 17d; B.177/a/5: 16d
Sandy Lake (Albany)	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.192/a/2: 14
Saskatchewan River (below the fork of the north-south branches, in the vicinity of Lake Winnipeg)	Early 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Destroy furs/goods	Burpee 1927: 258–59
Severn	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting & destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.198/a/63: 4d; B.198/a/49: 11
Trout Lake (Severn)	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting	HBCA B.220/a/5: 17d
Upper Missouri	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.107/a/21: 11d–12
York Factory	Mid 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Cease hunting & destroy furs/goods	HBCA B.239/a/102: 38; B.239/a/101: 33; Rich 1949: 93–94

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*Note:* The dates provided refer only to the timing of the observations noted in the source. They are not meant to suggest the possible period of the custom's initial practice.

Ojibway of Lac Seul. In 1843, McKenzie, who was a curious and insightful observer of Indian customs, compared the mourning practices of the local Ojibway with those of the Siouan-speaking Hidatsa of the Missouri in his journal, noting, "Here as well as there, they throw away all their property."<sup>12</sup> In all probability, the range of one or both of these customs extended through much of the territory between Lake Superior and the Rocky Mountains.<sup>13</sup>

The wide distribution of these practices suggests that they were of considerable antiquity, perhaps dating to the pre-Columbian period. Certainly, the disposal or destruction of personal goods extended far back in time in the east.<sup>14</sup> For example, while among the Montagnais during the early seventeenth century, Champlain commented that when one of their people died they interred all of their goods with the body. The Jesuit priest Jean Brebeuf identified similar behavior among the Huron in his *Relation* of 1636, while the Recollect missionary Louis Hennepin, who traveled widely in eastern North America during the early eighteenth century, wrote of the Indians in general: "They say that the soul does not leave the Body as soon as it dies, and therefore they take care to leave by the Body a Bow, Arrows, Corn, and fat Meat, for the Dead to subsist upon until they reach the Country of Souls" (Biggar 1971: 120; Hennepin 1974: 453; Thwaites 1959: 265, 271).<sup>15</sup> It is less clear if the prohibition against hunting extended back as far in time. Thomas Fiddler and James Stevens (1985: 53) have noted that "the custom of not hunting when there is a death is at least as old as the fur trade," but there do not appear to be references to such a practice in these early records. Perhaps it escaped the scrutiny of the European observers, or perhaps it was not practiced among the sedentary agricultural groups who were the main subjects of initial discussions of Indian manners and customs. In any event, specific references to the destruction of furs or personal goods appear in the fur trading records of the west at least by the early eighteenth century, while passages describing the temporary cessation of hunting out of grief may be found later in the century. In no case was it suggested that these were anything other than long-standing or traditional practices.

The rationale behind these particular customs seems to have been complex, involving several interrelated factors or motivations. At its most basic level the interring personal objects with the deceased was a practical tradition, for such goods helped to prepare them for the journey to the afterlife (cf. Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976: 161). For the Cree and Ojibway, death set in motion an involved journey that took an individual from the land of the living to a land inhabited by the spirits of the dead (see, e.g., Kohl 1985: 210–20; Vecsey 1983: 64; and Mandelbaum 1979: 158). For

the Ojibway at least, this was a test of skill that some people of lesser ability were unable to complete.<sup>16</sup> As we have seen in the passages cited above, it was understood by some nonnative observers that the spiritual equivalents of the goods placed with the corpse were to be employed by the deceased's spirit in making that trip. Inadequate preparation might make the journey more difficult, or even impossible. Failure to reach this afterworld would have dire consequences for the deceased's spirit.

Other motivations reflected the social and personal needs of those who survived. Mourning practices occurred within a social context, beyond the immediate needs of the individual, and therefore entailed certain responsibilities to the group (Mandelbaum 1976). Adherence to the proper customs was necessary to avoid retribution. The failure to mourn or treat the dead properly was considered a serious breach of conduct, and might result in some sort of sanction or punishment. In 1842 Charles McKenzie noted that "should an Indian lose a child (or even a relation) and strive to pay his debt for the rest of that season—all other Indians would accuse him of being void of Natural Affection,"<sup>17</sup> a serious charge indeed. Individuals' fear of group disapproval played an important role among these hunter-gatherers, serving to moderate antisocial behavior in the absence of coercive leadership or a legal system (Hallowell 1941). One medium of sanction was disease, to be invoked by the dead person, supernatural agents, or other people.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, some Ojibway believed that the spirits of departed people might linger around the living if not properly supplied, and in so doing might pose a risk by attempting to take the living with them to the afterworld (Vecsey 1983: 66).<sup>19</sup> Finally, sources of food might also be destroyed or corrupted by spirits should prohibitions against food collecting during the yearlong mourning period be ignored, potentially jeopardizing the survival of the group (Hilger 1992: 87).

Wholesale destruction of the victim's and the mourners' property, as well as the cessation of hunting for an extended period, suggest that the need to express personal grief was also an important motivational factor.<sup>20</sup> Here was a socially accepted means for the individual to reorient himself or herself following the death of a close relative, a way to assuage his or her grief through what otherwise would have been considered extravagant behavior (Mandelbaum 1976: 350; cf. Simeone 1991: 166). Such feelings of grief are powerful, and in small-scale hunting and gathering societies would potentially have been dangerous if they were allowed to continue unabated. As such, these customs served as a safety valve by which normalcy could be regained.

Finally, these customs may have served to help the mourners get on with their lives in another way. As Alexander Mackenzie suggested, by

riding themselves of all that would have daily reminded them of the departed, these natives hoped to lessen their anguish by forgetting. In this vein, David Mandelbaum (1979: 154), who undertook ethnographic research among the Plains Cree of Saskatchewan and Alberta in the 1930s, was told by informants that the personal goods of the deceased were given away because “the possessions of a dead person always reminded the relatives of their loss and so unnecessarily protracted the mourning period.”<sup>21</sup> This would seem to support the findings of Paul Rosenblatt, Patricia Walsh, and Douglas Jackson (1976: 68), who classified behaviors involving the destruction or other disposal of personal property as tie-breaking behavior, intended to establish new patterns of living for the survivors.

### The Effect of the Customs on the Fur Trade

Of some importance to the eventual changes that occurred in these customs was their effect on the western fur trade, for the goals of the fur traders and the mourning obligations of the Indians sometimes placed them at odds. In normal years, the death of an individual hunter and the invocation of these mourning practices might have had a small, but significant, impact on a fur trader's returns and profits. In addition to the loss of the victim's hunts, the trader would also be expected to help support the grieving family for a time as the closest relatives destroyed their furs and goods or refused to trap for a year. His post might also be deprived of its critical stock of “country provisions,” the foodstuffs supplied to the traders by the Indians. For example, in 1788 one of the Indian men who traded at Gloucester House drowned, with resultant damage to the HBC's stock of provisions and its trade. There the trader was “very sorry for the accident, as they was at their hunting Ground, and had great prospect of success as the Deer tracks was plenty, and now instead of bringing in victuals, the house must afford them a temporary supply, as it is well known on such occasions an Indian will not hunt, nor even take care of what he has already provided.”<sup>22</sup> For the traders, providing emergency help to the needy, whether because of sickness, incapacity, or destitution, was considered a normal cost of doing business in the fur trade, and could be argued on both business and humanitarian grounds.<sup>23</sup> During the mourning period, this practice was often reluctantly extended to the survivors who, although physically capable of providing for themselves, were effectively prohibited from doing so by grief.

From the trader's perspective these unanticipated costs were exacerbated by the standard business procedure of providing native trappers with credit, goods advanced at the beginning of the season in anticipation of the returns to be brought in at the end. When a death occurred the losses

included not only potential and actual furs that would not be collected, but also the goods that had been given in advance.<sup>24</sup> In fact, according to Charles McKenzie, it was expected that, “by right,” under such circumstances he was expected to forgive the mourner’s debt.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately for the traders, and for the companies they represented, under normal conditions such deaths were not common, and their impact was likely to be little more than a temporary financial setback to the local trade. While perhaps frustrating, the loss of a few destroyed furs or the temporary cessation of hunting by a few trappers did not represent a fundamental challenge to the long-term viability of their companies.

In times of widespread and severe epidemics, however, the overall impact of the mourning practices on the fur trade was bound to be much greater, for at least two reasons. First, an epidemic obviously increased the number of mourners. In many cases, only a few kinship networks linked the majority of the people trading at a given post, and so the necessity of grieving quickly permeated the local population. This meant that there would be no hunters to compensate for the furs lost to the mourning customs, and, potentially, none to provide for those who had stopped hunting. In extreme cases, an entire year’s trade might be lost to a fur trader. In 1737, the son of the French fur trader and explorer La Vérendrye witnessed the extent to which these practices might disrupt the trade of a post or region. While among the Cree of the Saskatchewan River during a severe smallpox epidemic, he observed that “those who escaped made a stop and threw into the river, according to their custom, all the beaver, pichoux, marten, etc., belonging to the dead as well as their own, so that the shore was lined with them and the portages full, all of which was a loss, as no one among the savages ventured to touch them” (Burpee 1927: 258–59). What might otherwise have been an excellent year for the fur trade among these Cree was instead entirely ruined in a surge of grief, an occurrence that was repeated countless times over the next century.

Second, widespread epidemics involved multiple posts, each experiencing losses associated with native mortality. This greatly lessened the chances that some districts could compensate for the limited trade collected in other districts in which there had been many deaths, as would have been possible in normal years. In turn, this placed great strain on the fur companies’ resources, which were tied up in the Indians’ hunts. Given a severe enough epidemic, or perhaps a series of consecutive unhealthy years, the impact of these mourning practices on the fur trade might be more than a short-term setback.

In fact, it seems likely that on at least one occasion epidemic-induced death and the resultant mourning process helped lead to structural changes

in the fur trade.<sup>26</sup> In 1819–20 measles and whooping cough spread through much of the territory west of Lake Superior, leaving large numbers of dead and a fur trade teetering on the brink of financial ruin.<sup>27</sup> In the Athabasca region, where the Montreal-based NWC had once made excellent profits at the expense of its bitter rival, the London-based HBC, NWC trader Willard Wentzel could only suggest that neither company's returns would come to much. In May of 1820 he informed his superior, Roderick McKenzie, that "this consideration requires that I should be more than usually reserved on the present situation of both Companies' affairs and probable issue of returns this year. In fact the Natives are so much disorganized in Athabasca, that if they are in same train of living in other parts of the North-West, it will not be too much to say that the fur trade is ruined for some years to come" (Masson 1960: 1:126–27).<sup>28</sup> The disorganization noted by Wentzel was undoubtedly due in large part to the almost universal mourning that followed the epidemic mortality, and a similar scenario was indeed being played out across much of the west, from Lake Superior to the Rockies. HBC governor William Williams made this absolutely clear in his letter to London in 1820, lamenting that "throughout the Country the ravages made by the Measles and Whooping Cough have produced a serious impression from their malignency [*sic*] and fatal effects, . . . and some hundreds have died. Owing to this cause I must fear from the disheartened state of the Indians accompanied by their superstitions will cause them in part measure to [refrain] from hunting which I anticipate will lessen the returns of Furs very considerably next year."<sup>29</sup> At post after post the traders could only observe in their letters and journals that the Indians were refusing to hunt out of grief for their departed relatives.<sup>30</sup>

As Governor Williams had predicted, 1820–21 was a poor year for the fur trade throughout much of the Northwest, extending the damage that had been done in 1819–20. Already experiencing declining returns in a period when intense competition was cutting into their trade, both the HBC and the NWC were hard hit by losses due to the deaths of hunters and the mourning of their survivors.<sup>31</sup> This unanticipated blow seems to have brought other factors to a head as, only one year later, in 1821 the once-bitter rivals merged, setting aside differences that had seemed insurmountable only a few years before.<sup>32</sup> It is understandable, then, that the directors of the revamped HBC that emerged out of this merger wished to see the end of these costly mourning customs, and if, in the subsequent period of monopoly, they sought to change the Indians' behavior. Nevertheless, it would be decades before their efforts began to pay off.

## Changing Traditions

Old World diseases began to penetrate into the region to the north and west of Lake Superior by the late seventeenth century, if not sooner. Over time their frequency increased throughout much of the west, often leading to heavy mortality (Ray 1976; Hackett 1999). Epidemics increased substantially during the period between 1821 and 1846, and by the 1830s serious outbreaks were an almost annual occurrence in some places. Nevertheless, they seem to have had no effect on the mourning practices of the Indians of the Central Subarctic, who appear to have continued practicing these mourning customs as before.<sup>33</sup> For the HBC this meant unwelcome, if predictable, epidemic-induced losses; for the native people, it meant frequent poverty or want in addition to the loss of loved ones. Then, in 1846, in the midst of a rapid series of devastating epidemics, changes began to appear in the long-standing behaviors of certain groups, changes that were wholly unanticipated by the fur traders.

In 1846 measles, influenza, dysentery, and other diseases swept across the west, and once again the casualties were heavy (Ray 1976; Hackett 1999). Although epidemic disease was by no means unusual among the Indians of the Central Subarctic, this year was particularly severe, perhaps the worst for sickness that had occurred since the 1780s. In the midst of this epidemic some fur traders began seeing unprecedented responses by some of the natives. Gone for some, if only temporarily, were the traditional duties to comfort and nurse the sick and to mourn the dead, responsibilities sacrificed in favor of self-preservation. At Oxford House, HBC trader Laurence Robertson “met 3 Indians coming for a supply of ammunition, stating that if they had such they were going off, so as to shun the light of their Friends Death and that of their own.”<sup>34</sup> In response, he “gave none but encouraged those in health to try & bring their Friends in reach of the Fort.” In Robertson’s eyes this was unusual behavior indeed, for the abandonment of the dead and dying in this manner was by no means a common practice among the Cree and Ojibway. Here, then, the trader was attempting to convince these men to do what in other times would have been second nature.

Likewise, at Lac Seul, in the midst of the epidemic, Charles McKenzie noted that “the Indians are going off as many as can having many at the point of death—Sons leaving their Fathers and Mothers—brothers leaving brothers—careless whether they can ever see them again.”<sup>35</sup> Essentially, those who could were avoiding all others, presumably in order to preserve their health. In contrast, McKenzie had always previously noted the tendency for the Ojibway to assist one another in times of need. Indeed, during

an epidemic the previous year he had observed many of the same people struggling to load those who were incapacitated by disease into canoes to take them to the ricing fields in the hope of saving their lives.<sup>36</sup> In 1846 the sick were simply abandoned.

Such seemingly callous behavior, while perhaps understandable in the midst of an epidemic of infectious disease, was unprecedented. In part this shift may have been related to a newfound understanding among the Indians that such diseases could be passed directly from one individual to another. Traditional etiologies did not allow for the direct transfer of a disease through close contact.<sup>37</sup> As a result, it was not as a rule considered dangerous to maintain close quarters with the sick, and entire families might accompany a healer in seeking a cure or in comforting the victim. By 1837, however, the people of the Cumberland House region along the Saskatchewan River knew enough to be wary of the HBC brigades, understanding that they could contract smallpox from them.<sup>38</sup> Avoidance behavior was also seen about this time at Lac Seul, including in 1844 and again in 1845, when the Ojibway left the post en masse in a fruitless attempt to escape infection (Hackett 1999: 393, 394).<sup>39</sup> Most likely, this conduct also indicated the tremendous stress that these scourges were causing. After decades of disease, death, and despair some people seem to have reached a breaking point and were unable to cope with the wholesale death and destruction in their former ways.

Although the traders found these departures from customary practice disturbing, there was a welcome change as well. For some groups the epidemics of 1846 led to a shift that the HBC had long sought but had never been able to obtain.<sup>40</sup> In September, veteran trader Donald Ross of Norway House wrote to his superior, Governor George Simpson. He began by recapitulating the effect that he had expected the mortality would have on his trade, based on traditional mourning behavior:

The numerous deaths among the hunters would of itself occasion a serious falling off and amongst Indians the event extends much farther as most of those who survive generally lose all heart and energy and for months on end do little more than moan and mourn helplessly for their lost friends and relatives their little property is either recklessly destroyed or given away thus rendering themselves a great measure unable to hunt even after their fit of despondency may have passed away.<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, Ross had expected a collapse in his trade such as William Williams had seen in 1819–20. In this year, however, things were different, the prospects for trade not quite as bleak. Ross continued: “I noticed this

season however, what I never perceived before, a marked degree of callousness and indifference among the Indians, to the loss of even their nearest and dearest relations and even death itself seemed to have become so familiar to them as to have lost much of its usual terror." While the deaths of the Norway House trappers and laboring Indians were certain to damage Ross's returns substantially, the mourning customs of those who survived would not.<sup>42</sup>

Ross was apparently not alone among the traders in benefiting from this unanticipated change in behavior. It would seem that similar instances of unusual mourning were seen not just at Norway House but also at several of the other posts in the HBC's vast Northern Department.<sup>43</sup> The following summer, in 1847, Simpson explained to the governor and committee of the HBC the fears that he and the traders had had that the epidemic would severely damage their profits. He informed London of the "great mortality that took place last summer among the natives which we were apprehensive would have distracted the survivors (as is usual in cases of mourning) from giving attention to the chase. The discontinuation of this usage, however, reflects much credit on the management of the gentlemen in charge of districts and posts, to whose influence with the natives may, in a great degree, be ascribed the abandonment of many of their old and useless customs."<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, Simpson did not identify the other posts where this change in behavior had been observed.

Despite Simpson's suggestion, the abandonment of these practices was not due simply or even chiefly to the exhortations of his "gentlemen." Indeed, fur traders had been expressing their frustration and displeasure at least since La Vérendrye's time, and probably long before, with little or no result. In fact, the traders' message was undermined by the assistance that they provided to the survivors while condemning their practices. Even when they were able to influence native behavior it was only with great trouble, and the results were limited. Thus, at Fort Chipewyan in the last decade of the eighteenth century, Alexander Mackenzie observed that "we had some difficulty to make them comprehend that the debts of a man who dies should be discharged, if he left any furs behind them; but those who understand this principle of justice, and profess to adhere to it, never fail to prevent the appearance of any skins beyond such as may be necessary to satisfy the debts of their dead relations" (Lamb 1970: 251–52). Far more often, they were unable to sway the Indians and such behavior was accepted as simply a loss on the trade.

To be sure, the traders may have played a role in convincing the natives by 1846, though more likely through their trade practices rather than their individual influence.<sup>45</sup> The monopoly conditions that prevailed throughout

much of HBC territory following the merger of the NWC and HBC in 1821 enabled the new company to set trading policies that made it difficult to keep up the old ways (Ray 1988: 105–98). Without significant opposition in most quarters, the HBC traders were under far less pressure to forgive the debts of those who threw away their goods and furs, or who stopped hunting. Moreover, in some districts they were able to make a periodic switch from giving credit to the “ready barter” system, whereby goods were exchanged for furs only when they were brought to the trader. Under this system, if the trappers brought in no furs they would not be paid, and so would be destitute. This move was most definitely to the advantage of the trader, and was welcomed by some. Thus, in 1834 Charles McKenzie at Lac Seul wrote, “I am fond of this system, but I must say that it is a most cold, calculating system—& not at all times to the mind & disposition of the natives—but a very blessed system to the traders in a year of sickness & death.”<sup>46</sup> When epidemics struck, as they did increasingly during the 1830s and 1840s, the company’s loss was minimized, while the Indians suffered for it. The result for the latter was a period of frequent scarcity and accrued debt, in which the act of fulfilling their mourning obligations prolonged their misery.

Perhaps, too, the presence of Christian missionaries was beginning to have an effect on these mourning customs, as they were having on other aspects of native life. According to cross-cultural research by Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson (1976: 102–3), the adoption of Christianity by non-Christian groups tends to bring only limited change to death customs. However, one area in which conversion does have a significant impact is property ownership. Thus, “Christian influence is associated with substantially greater conflict over property, [and] with substantially less property destruction [during mourning].” In their minds, conversion brings a much-heightened concern with material goods, a concern that favors retention of belongings over their destruction or redistribution.

Such a dynamic may have been in play in the 1840s, a period when missionary activity was beginning to take off in the west and impact on the Indians. In 1846 Donald Ross identified both traditional and Christian groups at Norway House, an increasing trend throughout the region. Nearby the post was a Methodist mission run by James Evans, as well as a village of converts called Rossville. The village, founded in 1840, featured houses, a chapel, a schoolhouse, a large garden, and a workshop, and within six years was home to between three hundred and four hundred people, many of whom manned the freight boats of the HBC (Jacobs 1853: 30–31).<sup>47</sup> At nearby Oxford House, trader Laurence Robertson could distinguish traditional and “progressive” factions among the local Indi-

ans, each with different attitudes toward the adoption of new customs (Hackett 1999: 447). At Red River, the Anglican and Roman Catholic missions had attracted significant numbers of converts to the settlement and were attempting to influence Indian behaviors and beliefs in their own way. Elsewhere in the west, dozens of missions had sprung up, and much of their effort was directed toward undermining traditional beliefs and behaviors while encouraging their replacement with Western practices and ideas.<sup>48</sup> No doubt, mourning customs that seemed to promote poverty and lengthy periods of inactivity were considered peculiar, and frowned on as much by the missionaries as by the traders.

At the same time, confidence in traditional spiritual concepts and practices was doubtless being challenged by their apparent irrelevance and inefficacy during an era of regular and deadly epidemics. In his study of the historical changes that have affected Ojibway religion, Christopher Vecsey (1983: 154–59) identified three broad responses to the health crises engendered by the presence of the white diseases, two of which, an increase in conversions to Christianity and the rise of new religious movements, signaled the decline of traditional belief systems. Aboriginal healing ceremonies or medical practices could provide little relief or protection against the “foreign” diseases introduced from beyond the region. In this era the annual mortality that some groups experienced would certainly have been disheartening and may indeed have resulted in a degree of callousness toward the dead, as Ross suggested. It may also have caused the survivors to search for effective and nontraditional means of stopping the disaster. Worse still, some of the old ways made survival less likely. Thus, for instance, at Oxford House, Robertson noted that those who heeded his medical advice and accepted his aid during the epidemic died in far smaller numbers than those who adhered to tradition.<sup>49</sup> This correlation between traditional practices and high mortality was seen in many places during this era, and the results would not have been lost on the survivors, who sought to maximize their chances of surviving subsequent epidemics.<sup>50</sup> In turn, such futility may have forced some to question their overall spiritual system, and the customs that were attached to it. One casualty, at least in the short term, may have been their long-standing mourning customs.

### Aftermath

In spite of the changes seen by Ross and others in 1846, the aboriginal people of the Central Subarctic did not reject wholesale these traditional mourning practices in the decades that followed. Some groups continued to express their grief in the traditional manner, following these customs into

the twentieth century. Yet others appear either to have been more selective or simply to have abandoned these practices over time. This is in keeping with the fate of other cultural characteristics observed among the Indians of the Central Subarctic. For instance, Hallowell (1936) documented significant variations in the timing of abandonment of the Midewiwin (a spiritual tradition practiced by the Ojibway people from the Lake Winnipeg region, and beyond) over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also identified a gradient from acculturated to more traditional among people living along the Berens River, from its mouth on the east side of Lake Winnipeg, to those living in the interior (Hallowell 1992). Some peoples maintained traditional beliefs and practices much longer than others.

It is not unexpected, then, that there is evidence of both the abandonment and the persistence of these mourning customs among the Cree and Ojibway even into the twentieth century. For instance, in 1880 S. G. Wright, living among the Ojibway of Leech Lake, Minnesota, noted that “from ancient time it was customary to bury with the dead various articles, such especially as were most valued in lifetime. . . . This habit has now ceased” (Yarrow 1976: 95).<sup>51</sup> At almost the same time, however, the HBC trader at Osnaburgh House, located some 450 kilometers to the north and east, was visited by two Ojibway men who arrived with poor hunts, and he noted in his journal that “it is generally the case as their father died in February” (Bishop 1974: 225). Here, at least, things were as they had been in the early part of the century. By the early twentieth century, the anthropologist Alanson Skinner (1911) could note that the mourning practices of the Eastern Cree (of the Albany River area) had changed considerably since the day of Alexander Mackenzie, while making no mention of either of the two customs. However, Fiddler and Stevens (1985: 53) have suggested that the prohibition on hunting after the death of a close relative persisted among more isolated Ojibway groups living a short distance to the north into the twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps, as Hallowell suggested, relative isolation provided some immunity from the outside forces that were eroding aboriginal cultures during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Other groups seem to have become more selective in the customs they observed, especially as the practices relate to the disposal of personal goods. Data from related peoples in neighboring regions indicate a shift in, but not the total abandonment of, traditional behavior. In 1914 Skinner (1914: 74–76) identified burial with possessions as a funeral ritual among the Plains Cree. By the mid-1930s Mandelbaum (1979: 152, 154) could find no evidence of this practice. Instead, personal objects were given away, rather than being destroyed. Richard Preston and Sarah Preston (1991: 143), who worked among the Cree of the east coast of James Bay from

1963 to 1984, noted that on a person's death a grieving relative might burn some personal effects that were considered of little value to others, but other property was stored for a period of a year and then redistributed to relatives.<sup>53</sup> This was similar to the case of the Hare, an Athapaskan-speaking group living in the Northwest Territories, who modified their mourning customs during the mid-twentieth century, choosing to destroy only certain items of lesser value. Valuable possessions such as houses, dogs, and radios were redistributed rather than destroyed (Savishinsky and Hara 1981: 320).<sup>54</sup>

This behavior may have been a compromise between losing high-value goods that were difficult to acquire and increasingly becoming a part of Indian life and the need to mourn appropriately. In redistributing rather than destroying these effects they avoided the complete poverty that generally followed Subarctic mourning during the fur trade period.<sup>55</sup> This practice was at once traditional and new. Clearly, the exchange of personal effects as part of mourning was a long-standing tradition, often noted in the records of the fur trade. It also seems to have met the personal and social needs of the mourners. However, it is less certain that the practical aspect of mourning, the preparation of the spirit of the departed for its journey to the afterlife, was also being met. Previously, the range of goods to be destroyed or interred included goods of all values (often everything), including those that were difficult to replace, such as guns and other trade items. More recently, the value of the items, or perhaps the difficulty of replacing them, seems to have emerged as a defining criterion in their selection.

## Conclusion

Up to the midpoint of the nineteenth century, traditional mourning practices among the Indians of the Central Subarctic included the suspension of hunting and the destruction and/or redistribution of personal goods. In 1846, the native people who traded at the HBC's Norway House chose not to mourn their dead in the traditional way, behavior that, if the reports of the fur traders are reliable, was unprecedented. In the midst of a devastating epidemic they seem to have neither destroyed their goods and those of the deceased, nor, apparently, ceased hunting. Either of these would have been a standard reaction in previous years, and this deviation in behavior by the Indians was considered highly noteworthy by the fur traders. If these customs were truly abandoned then the traders could expect far smaller losses during the increasingly common years of high mortality.

The extent to which the Indians of the Subarctic followed the lead of those of the Norway House area is as yet unclear, as are the reasons for

this shift. Possible explanations may include the pressure exerted by the fur traders and their changing trade policies, the increased influence of missionaries, and a loss of confidence in traditional spiritual practices. This motivational distinction is critical. If, for instance, this behavior emerged as part of increasing Christian influence coupled with a decline in traditional spiritual beliefs, then the abandonment of a few mourning customs would hint at much more essential transformations to the Indians' belief structures that were occurring during the 1840s. On the other hand, it may also be that the Norway House people sought simply to escape the cycle of poverty that resulted from repeated periods of mourning by ceasing to follow these practices or, perhaps, by leaning toward the redistribution rather than the destruction of their goods. If so, the changes in these customs, while still significant, may well have been more an expedient act to avoid the loss of possessions.

Despite the changes, the persistence of these mourning practices was remarkable. In all probability they had been firmly established by the early eighteenth century, if not long before. In the face of countless epidemics and the displeasure of the fur traders, these particular customs survived intact well into the nineteenth century, and in some cases much longer. Even when changes did occur, it was often in keeping with traditional patterns of belief, rather than through outright abandonment. In turn, this suggests that, although the outcome of the introduction of Old World diseases among the aboriginal people of the Americas was sometimes rapid cultural disruption or loss, the survival of certain cultural traits was also possible.

## Notes

I would like to thank *Ethnohistory* and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for revision. I must also acknowledge the permission of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives to quote from their records. The Hannah Institute (Associated Medical Services, Inc.) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research supported me through doctoral and postdoctoral grants during the data collection and preparation of this essay, for which I am very appreciative.

- 1 Although the terms *grieving* and *mourning* are related they are not interchangeable. Grief is the collection of feelings that people may feel after suffering a loss. Mourning, however, is the set of culturally defined behaviors that allows individuals to express their grief externally (Counts and Counts 1991: 284).
- 2 Harold Driver (1964: 372) suggested that there was a link between warfare and this form of mourning behavior. When warriors died in military encounters, Driver argued, the need to replenish lost goods destroyed out of grief and the need for revenge combined to precipitate further raids.
- 3 In the 1850s Johann Kohl (1985: 159, 218) noted that the Ojibway living south of Lake Superior left food, tobacco, and, occasionally, a gun in the graves for the use of the spirit.

- 4 The scalp may have been a symbolic device to indicate that the soul of the slain enemy had been sent to be a slave to their deceased relative in the afterlife (see Tyrrell 1916: 333).
- 5 In the early nineteenth century Aeneas McDonell observed that at Lac Seul, “when they bury an Indian they never [fail] to put his gun, medicine bag, axe, fireworks and drum etc in the grave with him; and generally an orator makes a speech to the deceased in which he gives him directions [for] his journey to the other world. . . . They often on the death of a relation give or throw away their clothes and necessaries etc for fear of burthening their deceased relation” (National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC] MG 19, C 4, vol. 53:5).
- 6 Provincial Archives of Manitoba (hereafter PAM), Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA) B.198/a/49: 11.
- 7 PAM MG10 F4, p. 7.
- 8 HBCA B.3/a/74: 19; B.192/a/2: 14; B.105/a/1: 18; B.107/a/23: 8; Burpee 1927: 258–59; Lamb 1970: 135.
- 9 Evidence gathered in the 1930s by Mary Hilger (1992: 86–87) seems to argue for a more comprehensive ban. While among the Southwestern Ojibway of the United States, she found that “formerly for one year following a death all the members of the deceased person’s family were not permitted to participate in seasonal occupations, such as production of maple sugar, gathering of wild rice or berries or garden vegetables, or hunting or fishing.”
- 10 HBCA B.149/a/11: 16, 32; B.156/a/13: 50; B.155/a/50: 21. See also HBCA B.220/a/5: 17d.
- 11 Cree and Ojibway are distinct but related languages of the Algonquian family. On mourning among the Chipewyan, see Esau 1986: 95–98. The destruction of personal possessions was also observed by Regina Flannery among the Gros Ventres of Montana (cited in Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976: 73).
- 12 HBCA B.107/a/21: 11d–12. McKenzie had been sent among the Hidatsa by the NWC and was ideally situated to observe their mourning customs during a devastating whooping cough epidemic (Masson 1960: 1:371–72).
- 13 According to Diamond Jenness (1989: 281) the practice of disposing of goods at the death of a close relative was almost universal among the Indians of Canada, and it would seem that it extended as well to parts of the United States, both adjacent to Canada and distant (e.g., Yarrow 1976: 51). The Cocopa, a tribe of predominantly hunter-gatherers that lived in the American Southwest, destroyed food, clothes, and equipment in order that the spirits could have those things after their death (Mandelbaum 1976: 351). Indeed, customs requiring the mourners to destroy, temporarily put away, or give away personal possessions of the deceased seem to have been a common response to death across many cultures (Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976).
- 14 This practice bears some resemblance to the communal Feast of the Dead, a Huron ritual that was observed by the French during the seventeenth century. This ceremony involved the redistribution of goods, and generosity was especially valued. Thus, the priest Le Jeune wrote in 1636: “You will see them often; in the depth of winter, almost entirely naked, while they have handsome and valuable robes in store, that they keep in reserve for the Dead; for this is their point of honour. It is on such occasions they wish above all to appear magnificent” (quoted in Thwaites 1959: 265).

The Ojibway sometimes joined in the Feast of the Dead with the Huron during the seventeenth century, later borrowing it, but the practice appears to

- have been abandoned by them long before the nineteenth century (Hickerson 1988: 39–41). In many communities the Feast of the Dead was replaced by a much smaller feast *for* the dead (Vecsey 1983: 71).
- 15 Among the Huron, according to Brebeuf, the death of an individual was followed by the redistribution of presents, some of which went with the deceased, while others were given to the friends and relatives. See also Lafitau 1977: 230, 239, 251, 252.
  - 16 The ethnographic literature is consistent in emphasizing the challenge faced by the Ojibway dead trying to reach the afterworld. However, it is not clear if the Cree anticipated an equally difficult journey.
  - 17 HBCA B.107/a/20: 13d.
  - 18 In the 1930s Hallowell (1939: 192) learned of a case in the Berens River area of Manitoba in which a man's sickness was said to have been the result of mistreating a corpse that he was preparing for burial. The Ojibway and Cree maintained an ambivalent relationship with the dead, who might offer or withhold valuable assistance to the living or punish them for misdeeds (Vecsey 1983: 66–67; Hallowell 1967: 158, 163; Kohl 1985: 107). Likewise, it was possible that serious sickness or misfortune might result from another living person (through witchcraft), or through the intercession of supernatural entities that wished to punish the act itself (Hallowell 1939: 191).
  - 19 In the 1950s Flannery found that among the Gros Ventres of Montana the need to observe mourning customs properly was “tied up with two beliefs—the first being that if objects were not placed with the body, the deceased would return to look for the things valued in life; the second, that the recently deceased [would] try to lure the living to join them” (cited in Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976: 73).
  - 20 It would also seem that two different external manifestations of grief were operational, a more immediate and intense grief characterized by the destruction of property, and a longer-lasting (and perhaps more formal) grief that was characterized by the observance of a longer-term ban on certain behaviors. There are parallels with mourning behavior observed among the Huron during the seventeenth century. For them, a ten-day period was set aside for intense mourning, while less profound exhibitions of grief were expressed for an entire year (Kinietz 1965: 108).
  - 21 Richard Preston and Sarah Preston (1991: 143) noted that in the modern era the Cree of eastern James Bay placed the goods of the deceased in storage for a year, in part to avoid being reminded of the dead.
  - 22 HBCA B.78/a/18: 1d.
  - 23 On HBC paternalism see Ray 1984, 1988, 1990; but cf. Black-Rogers 1987.
  - 24 The traders considered the provision of goods in advance to be a wasteful practice, as it allowed some trappers to run up large debts that they could not hope to clear. Eventually, the traders would be forced to forgive either a portion or all of the debt in order to keep the trappers hunting. Under conditions of competition, which prevailed generally in western Canada until 1821, it was impossible to end or alter significantly this practice.
  - 25 HBCA B.107/a/20: 13d. The loss was offset to a certain extent by the goodwill and loyalty that the traders obtained from the Indians, especially during the periods when competition was at its height.
  - 26 It is likely that the devastating smallpox epidemic that swept through much of

- the west in 1781–83 also helped reshape the fur trade, as independent traders or small concerns who lost much of their capital due to mortality and mourning among the Indians were forced to abandon the trade, while others banded together in the wake of the disease. On the role of this epidemic in shaping the emerging fur trade, see Lytwyn 1986: 44; Arthur Morton 1939: 334; Glover 1952: lxii, 333; and Innis 1964: 152–53, 252.
- 27 On this epidemic see Ray 1988; Decker 1989; and Hackett 1999.
- 28 Alexander McDonald, at Fort Wedderburn on Lake Athabasca, informed HBC governor Williams that “from the death of so many relations, those who survived have been careless; they have buried great part of their clothing and altho’ heavily in debt are loudly calling out for supplies” (HBCA D.1/13: 43–44; see also Esau 1986: 95–97).
- 29 HBCA D.1/2: 11–11d.
- 30 Typical of this were the comments made by the trader at Escabitchewan in northwestern Ontario, who recorded that the Indians were sick with measles, and “those that are well in health are doing nothing but lamenting those that are gone, so that I have every reason to think that trade will be nothing” (HBCA B.64/a/8: 9d, 15, 17d). See also HBCA B.93/e/1: 3; B.16/e/3: 2; B.16/a/3: 2; B.105/a/7: 71d; Franklin 1823: 52; Houston 1974: 49.
- 31 The ongoing decline of the HBC’s returns during this period can be seen in a comparison of its overall trade figures. From a total of ninety-five thousand Made Beaver (a standard of trade developed by the HBC, based on the value of a single prime beaver skin, to establish prices for all types of furs) traded in 1818, the company’s share fell to eighty-six thousand in 1819, and to sixty-nine thousand in 1820 (Rich 1960: 394). The last year included some of the declines due to the epidemic mortality and mourning, although the full effect of the epidemic lasted into 1821. For its part, the Northwest Company had been experiencing a long period of intense competition that had made serious inroads into its returns (Innis 1964: 274–80).
- 32 There were several other factors that limited the potential for profit and helped bring about the merger, including the escalating violence, frequent legal battles, internal dissension within the NWC leadership, and the accelerating decline in fur animals throughout most of the western fur lands (W. L. Morton 1967: 58–59). Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the losses suffered as a result of the epidemic helped to hasten the merger.
- 33 Although, by the nineteenth century, at least one aspect of Cree mourning had changed in some places, as the large collective feasts that had once been held in honor of the dead were being abandoned (Lamb 1970: 139). Thus, according to Alexander Mackenzie, “feasts used to be made at funerals, and annually in honour of the dead; but they have been, for some time, growing into disuse, and I never had an opportunity of being present at any of them.” However, feasts associated with funerals have survived in some communities, such as Norway House and Oxford House, where they have been transformed through the presence of Methodist missionaries (Raymond Shirritt-Beaumont, personal communication, February 2002).
- 34 HBCA B.156/a/25: 10d.
- 35 HBCA B.107/a/25: 6d.
- 36 HBCA B.107/a/24: 3; B.3/c/1: Letter 8, Charles McKenzie to Thomas Corcoran, Lac Seul, 30 August 1845.

- 37 According to Hallowell (1939: 191), traditional Ojibway theories of disease causation included four classes of complaints: those caused by fortuitous circumstance (physical insults and lesser diseases such as colds); those caused by sorcery; those caused by dream visits from spiritual beings; and those that were the result of transgressions (sins). There was, thus, a dichotomy between afflictions of a natural, or obvious, origin, and those for which the cause, and therefore the treatment, was not readily apparent (Clements 1932: 186). Natural ones were treatable without resorting to spiritual assistance (Hallowell 1976: 409). This lack of understanding of direct contagion is evident in the words of a Cree witness to the smallpox epidemic of the early 1780s, who explained to David Thompson that “we had no belief that one Man could give it to another, any more than a wounded Man could give his wound to another” (quoted in Tyrrell 1916: 337).
- 38 In May according to the local HBC trader, John Lee Lewes, they were “off to pass the Summer in the thick woods a considerable distance from hence, so that they may not come in contact with the Saskatchewan Brigade on its way downwards. They are one & all dreadfully alarmed at the idea of catching the small Pox which has induced them to leave off hunting rather earlier than usual so as to give them time to get out of the way before the People of the infected part of the Country pass” (HBCA B.49/a/49: 35d–36).
- The contrast between the Indians’ behavior and understanding of contagion during this epidemic and their knowledge a half-century earlier is complete. Some of the Indians trading to the north of Lake Huron appear to have practiced avoidance behavior as early as 1790 (Hackett 1999: 255).
- 39 Likewise, by the arrival of the Hind Expedition in 1857, the Ojibway of the Lake of the Woods area were keenly aware of the connection between the arrival of nonnatives and disease (Hind 1971: 100).
- 40 It should be stressed that the changes in behavior were not universal, and some groups or individuals continued to mourn in a traditional manner, including some at Oxford House (HBCA B.156/a/25: 36d), Fort Frances (HBCA D.5/18: 232; D.5/19: 129d), and on the Winnipeg River (HBCA B.107/a/25: 4).
- 41 HBCA D.5/18: 466–66d. Norway House was among the posts most frequently victim to epidemics during this era (Hackett 1999).
- 42 This change in behavior was corroborated by Robert Ballantyne (1971: 79), who was employed by the HBC in the Norway House area at about this time. Years later he noted of the Indians: “They do not now bury guns, knives, &c., with their dead, as they once did, probably owing to their intercourse with white men.”
- 43 In the mid-nineteenth century the Northern Department stretched from just to the east of Lake Winnipeg to the Rocky Mountains.
- 44 HBCA A.12/3: 444d.
- 45 The influence of the fur trade on mourning behavior may have begun at an early date. Even as early as the 1630s it was claimed that some Indians in the east had cut back on the value of their tributes to the dead in favor of trade with the Europeans, while others had even pillaged older graves in order to obtain trade items (Lafitau 1977: 239).
- 46 HBCA B.107/a/13: 20–21. The ready barter system was periodically put in place during the nineteenth century but tended to be revoked after two or three years, at least in the HBC’s Southern Department (Bishop 1974: 118–24).

- Although whether or not the Indians of the Central Subarctic were dependant on European trade goods during the nineteenth century is a controversial question (cf. Blain 1991 and Bishop 1974), there is no doubt that these mourning customs created real hardship among the Indians.
- 47 HBCA B.154/a/46: 9; A.12/3: 320. The explosion of missionary activity in western Canada beginning in the 1840s can be seen in Moodie, Kaye, and Lytwyn 1993.
  - 48 The 1830s witnessed a battle between the Anglican missionaries and traditional Ojibway spiritual leaders in Red River, leading to some factionalism among the Indians. Conversely, the Swampy Cree who settled in Red River were largely embracing the message of the Protestant missionaries (Peers 1994: 131–37). In the meantime, Roman Catholic clergy in the Red River settlement were making some progress in changing Ojibway lifestyles along the Assiniboine River (ibid.: 138).
  - 49 HBCA B.156/a/15: 10d.
  - 50 The harmful effect of traditional practices during epidemics has been a common theme, both in the comments of observers and in the recent literature (e.g., Taylor 1977: 58; Schoolcraft 1978: 312; Dobyns 1983: 16; Trimble 1989: 46).
  - 51 Conversely, in the 1930s Hilger (1992: 84–87) visited the Ojibway of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan and found that they continued to place food, tobacco, and firearms with the dead. Observance of the taboo against gathering certain forms of food for a span of one year following a death was less regular.
  - 52 Indeed, much of what was traditional persisted among these comparatively isolated Ojibway into the twentieth century,
  - 53 However, on one occasion a small house was destroyed. This may have been due to a fear of the spirit.
  - 54 Among the Tanacross of Alaska a more formalized exchange of gifts followed death, occurring in the context of a funeral ceremony that William Simeone (1991) equated with the potlatch held by the Indians of the Pacific Northwest.
  - 55 In contrast, researchers among the Cocopa of the American Southwest during the 1940s found a society that was living in comparative poverty in terms of material goods, as virtually all possessions of value were destroyed following the death of a relative (Mandelbaum 1976: 351).

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