

# Native labour and social stratification in the Hudson's Bay Company's Northern Department, 1770–1870<sup>1</sup>

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The Hudson's Bay Company began to employ Indian and Métis about 1770. During the competitive period (until 1821) natives held administrative as well as labouring positions. Under near monopoly conditions after 1821, natives did not fare as well. With few exceptions they gained access only to the lowest levels of the employment hierarchy. This loss of status caused frustration which was expressed in several ways.

La Comagnie de La Baie d'Hudson commençait à employer des Amérindiens et des Métis jusqu'en 1770. Pendant la période concurrentielle (jusqu'à 1821) les indigènes ont tenu des postes administratifs ainsi que des postes journaliers. Sous des conditions qui s'approche d'un monopole après 1821, les indigènes ne se débrouillaient pas aussi bien. Sauf pour quelques exceptions, ils ont réussi seulement les plus bas rangs d'hierarchie d'emploi. Cette perte de status a causé la frustration qui était exprimée par divers manières.

For well over two centuries (c. 1670–1900), employees of the Hudson's Bay Company functioned within a clearly delineated occupational hierarchy. At the apex were the administrators or officers: the factors, masters and chief traders, clerks and surgeons. At the lower levels were the company servants: tradesmen, boatmen, and labourers. After the union of the Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company in 1821 the hierarchy became even more pronounced and rigid. The line between officers and servants became an almost impregnable barrier. A man engaged at the servant level stood little chance of becoming an officer, conversely, those hired as officers were almost never demoted to the servant level.

Officers had greater responsibilities than servants. They were charged with the over-all functioning of the fur trade posts. They corresponded with each other, kept all post records, ordered trade goods and supplies, valued furs, supervised the men, and ensured that necessary jobs were performed. At the same time they enjoyed considerable prestige, had many special privileges and earned high salaries (or income from shares). Hence, it is safe to assume that

intelligent and ambitious young men might aspire to become officers rather than servants of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Several factors influenced the position within the hierarchy of the company that an individual held. It is clear that one of the most important of these was 'race' or ethnic origin. The company tended to describe culturally similar groups from specific regions such as Orkney, Lewis Island or mainland Scotland as separate 'races.' An employee's 'racial' origin was an important aspect of his employment records. Officers also frequently discussed servants as members of an identified 'race.' It has therefore been possible to show that the Hudson's Bay Company engaged employees according to stereotyped preconceptions of ethnic suitability (Judd, 1980). The administrative or officer levels of the fur trade were held predominantly by mainland Scottish and, to a lesser degree, English. Orcadians and French Canadians tended overwhelmingly to be servants, especially labourers and voyageurs.

This paper considers ethnic influences in career patterns of Indian and mixed-blood employees of the Hudson's Bay Company between 1770 and 1870. It

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the Hudson's Bay Company for granting me permission to consult and quote from its archival holdings. I also wish to thank Arthur J. Ray for his ideas and suggestions, particularly those related to the graphical representations of the models used in this paper.

TABLE I

## HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPLOYMENT HIERARCHY

<i>Socio-economic Position</i>	<i>Pre-1821</i>	<i>Post-1821</i>
Officers	chiefs of factories (factors) masters of inland posts surgeons, sloopmasters writers apprentices	chief factors } commissioned chief traders } officers clerks, surgeons } gentlemen apprentice clerks } postmasters guides, interpreters, sloopmasters apprentice postmasters
Servants	tradesmen, steersmen canoemen, bowsmen middlemen labourers	tradesmen, steersmen boatmen, bowsmen middlemen labourers seasonal employees

focuses on the geographic region, fundamentally the Canadian Prairies, that for much of the period under study was known as the Northern Department.

Indians, of course, were vital to the fur trade from its beginning. In their traditional roles as hunters, trappers, and middlemen, however, they acted as free agents and were in no sense employees of the fur trading company to which they offered their goods. During the period of fur-trade rivalry that began soon after the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, the Hudson's Bay Company departed from its tradition of conducting trade from a few key forts on the shores of Hudson Bay and James Bay. It began to undertake exploration, to seek out inland bands who might not normally bring furs to the bayside, or whose furs might otherwise be traded to another company. Perhaps Samuel Hearne's guide, Mato-nabbee, is the most famous example of an Indian employed for the important work of guiding and interpreting for exploring parties.

The trading posts in these inland areas had to be supplied from the bayside factories or posts, which in turn were supplied from Britain. Often Indians both built and paddled the canoes which transported the trade goods and furs between the inland posts and the bayside. Usually they worked side by side with Orcadian servants who were previously inexperienced with canoes.<sup>2</sup> Because the Company relied on their expertise, Indian canoemen were highly paid for their services, and they also had the winter free to trap fur-bearing animals if they wished.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, regular Hudson's Bay Company servants normally served three to five-year contracts

which provided security and tied them to fixed annual salaries. Indians who acted as guides, interpreters, transporters, or canoe builders did not hold such contracts. They were hired on a casual basis to perform a specific task which could normally be completed in a single season. Throughout the fur-trade period under study Indians were hired almost exclusively for a single season, and not as regularly contracted servants.

Apart from being hired to fill positions for which they were perceived to have particular talents, Indians were used to fill positions when European workers were unavailable or difficult to procure. And, specifically, Indians were also engaged as a means of controlling the demands of other segments of the labour force. The first instance of this occurred in 1805 when the company encountered collective resistance among potential employees in Orkney, men formerly in the service from Orkney, and Orcadians currently in the service. The company believed the 'combinations' were formed 'with the view of preventing our being supplied with the Number of Hands wanted for our Service with the intention of obliging our Chiefs to raise the Wages of the men who are in the Service to an exorbitant rate.' As a solution to this development, the governor and committee announced, 'we shall try every resource either by natives or foreigners to break that Combination.'<sup>4</sup>

During this period there is no evidence to suggest that Indians were subject to prejudicial treatment as labourers. They appear to have been paid equivalent salaries to their European counterparts; they

2 Germain Maugenest who established an inland post out of Albany was probably exceptional in having ten canoes built and manned exclusively by thirty Indians

3 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Public Archives of Canada (hereafter HBCA) A 6/12 fo 157. pgh 5

4 HBCA A.6/17 fo 33f. (The term 'native' is somewhat problematical, however, because the Company used it indiscriminately to describe both Indians and mixed bloods.)

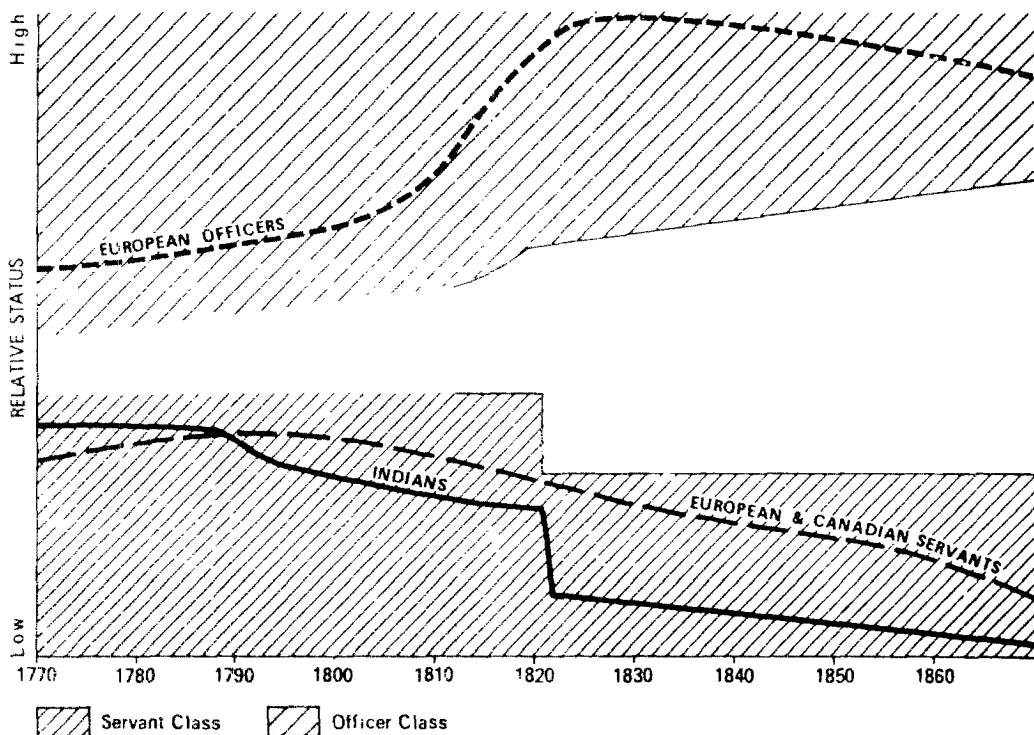


FIGURE 1 Hypothetical model of the relative status of Indians in fur trade social hierarchy

occupied positions ranging from common labourers to trusted guides and interpreters. They were, in short, treated as any other servants, with one major exception: they were not usually hired on contract, but were engaged merely for the season.

In 1821 the amalgamation of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company left a temporary surplus of labour as the new Company no longer needed to maintain as many posts as formerly. The Hudson's Bay Company's hierarchical system became even more entrenched and conservative. The status of Indians in the labour force declined. As before, only in the most rare circumstances did they work under contract, but were normally hired on a seasonal basis. The range of employment they were offered became seriously limited and at the same time confined geographically to areas which were largely exhausted of fur-bearing animals. For example, Indians were notably prominent on the York Boat trunk line between Norway House and York Factory, a largely fur barren region; they were also employed as carriers over the gruelling twelve-mile Methye Portage. Indeed, by the 1840s Indians were providing the backbone of seasonal tripmen on the route to York Factory. They were employed largely because they were cheap and readily available, and would find a means of subsistence in areas exhausted of fur-bearing animals.

However, by 1844 the situation, at least at Norway House, had altered enough for Donald Ross, its chief officer for many years, to assert that fur-bearing animals were no longer scarce in his area: 'Indians . . . could make excellent hunts, if they would only exert themselves,' he complained,

but so far from that being the case, about one half of them never left their firesides since last fall; . . . were it not for these rascally Robes and Tallow which compel us to give Summer employment to the village Indians, we could, I think in a short time bring about some reformation in this respect as matters stand at present, I am not at all surprised that the Indians here stick so close to their houses during severe winter weather: their Summer work and fall fisheries furnish a sufficiency of food and clothing, and these comprise almost all the want, of an Indian, there is therefore really no inducement for him to undergo the hardships and privations attendant on ranging widely through the wilderness in search of Furs – the contrast between his warm comfortable dwelling, steaming Kettle of fish and Potatoes, at night his wife on one side and . . . a Baim on the other – and the wearied tramp through wood and swamp and deep Snow day after day, the wretched open encampment at night with the chance of a still more wretched Rabbit or Partridge or nothing for Supper –

is far too great to be overlooked even by the not over bright perceptions of a Swampy.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Ross believed that trapping was much more onerous than tripping in York Boats, and given a chance they would abandon this occupation. Within four months, the Northern Council instituted a regulation allowing only those Indians who had trapped furs equal to the value of at least twenty Made Beaver the previous winter to be employed in the transport system. The rule was intended to apply to Indians of Norway House, Oxford House, and York Factory. It was instituted because the Indians' occupation as tripmen meant one thing — their character as hunters has entirely changed, and the company is deprived of the advantages that would be derived from their exertions, productive of a very serious loss.<sup>6</sup> Indians were considered to be valuable primarily as hunters and trappers and only secondarily as direct employees of the company. The company's protestations of humanitarianism notwithstanding, after 1821 Indians were employed because they were cheap, readily available, reliable, and trustworthy.<sup>7</sup>

At times Indians were manipulated to control the demands of contracted employees. In 1840, for example, the governor of the company reported, 'I think we must endeavour to reduce the compliment of Servants in some of the districts, substituting Indian labor at a low price for the labor of Whites, to whom particularly Canadian, we must give increased wages.'<sup>8</sup> They were also used to perform onerous tasks shunned by other groups. This was especially true at Methye Portage, the gruelling twelve-mile portage over the height of land dividing the Hudson Bay and Mackenzie River watershed. But even here Indians were intended primarily as hunters and provisioners. When their activities as porters interfered with their traditional pursuits, steps were taken to prevent their working on the portage.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, despite overriding perceptions of Indians as hunters and trappers, and almost in spite of itself, the company came increasingly to rely on this readily available pool of seasonal labourers. But because they were hired only seasonally for un-

skilled and low-paying jobs, by the end of the period under study Indians had fallen to the lowest level in the fur-trade employment hierarchy

Limited evidence suggests that the Indians themselves were not altogether pleased to be so cast,<sup>10</sup> but a lack of lucrative alternatives locked them into the rigid and restricted opportunities offered by the fur-trade monopoly. Therefore, the status of Indian employees in the Hudson's Bay Company was falling in the post-1821 fur trade period because Indians were unable to gain entry into the higher levels of employment. At a time when a capitalist class system was being consolidated in fur-trade society, Indians were forced to its lowest levels. The hypothesis that this occurred because they preferred pursuits more closely akin to their hunting and trapping traditions is insupportable; more likely, it occurred because the company was unwilling to admit them to more prestigious positions and remunerative posts. Indians have since been unable to escape the ramifications of their first real involvement in the capitalist white-dominated social structure that matured early in the post-1821 period.

In the context of the Canadian fur trade, native labour also included native people of mixed Indian and European ancestry. A model which attempts to account for the employment opportunities of mixed-blood employees has been conceptualized as Figure 11. As the model indicates, the mixed bloods cannot be seen as a homogeneous group, or even as two distinct groups, French Catholic and English Protestant. Evidence suggests that the type of employment attained by the father indicated, more than any other single cause, the level of employment that the son would be able to achieve in the company hierarchy (Judd, 1978). Even in the pre-1821 period, the sons of officers, especially those educated abroad, could expect to achieve a higher level of employment than the sons of the servant classes of employees.<sup>11</sup>

The picture became more complicated in the post-1821 period. As Figure 11 shows, French- and English-speaking mixed-blood sons of servants could expect to get only low-level servant positions within the company. The sons of officers on the whole could sometimes expect to do better, while those sons of officers who were educated outside the

5 Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), Hargrave Papers, Donald Ross to James Hargrave, Norway House, 7 Feb 1844, pp. 2809-13.

6 PAC Simpson to Hargrave, Red River Settlement, 15 June 1844, p. 2984.

7 HBCA D.4/99, fo. 52-52f

8 Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Donald Ross Papers, George Simpson to Ross, London, 2 Dec 1840

9 HBCA D.4/103, fo 17.

10 See for example, HBCA B.8/1, fo. 361

11 During this period, of course, very few mixed bloods who worked for the Company were of French-Canadian extraction, largely because few French Canadians worked for the Hudson's Bay Company long enough to raise mixed-blood families.

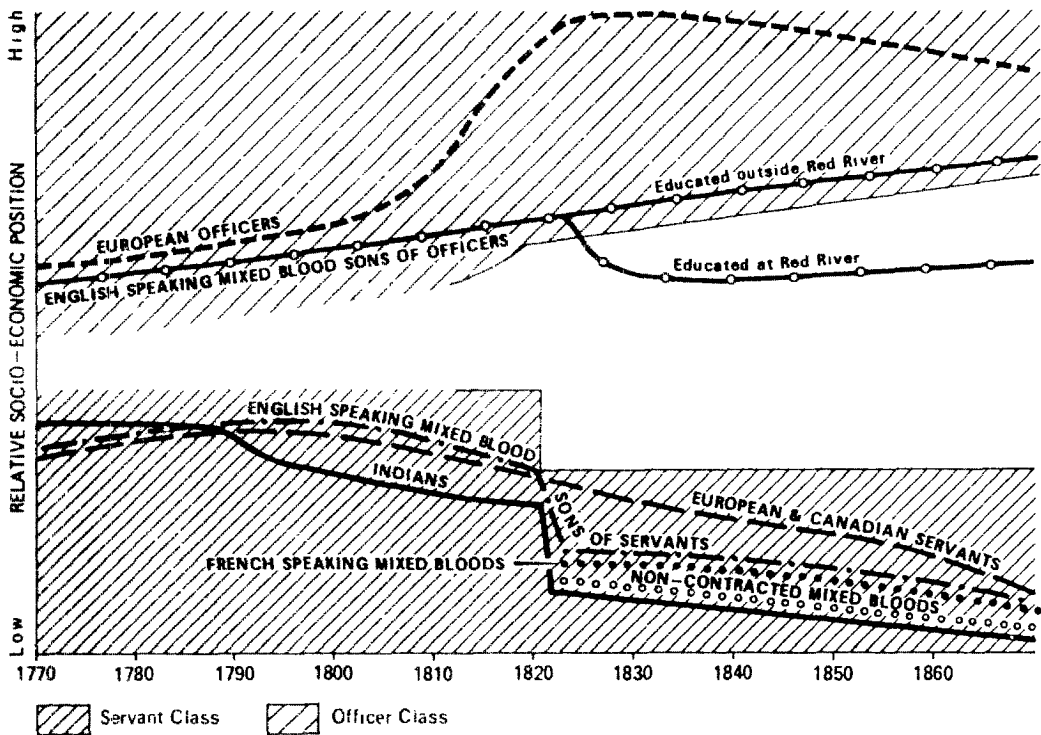


FIGURE II Hypothetical model of relative socio-economic position of mixed bloods in the Hudson's Bay Company fur trade hierarchy

Northern Department fared best within the company's ranks. The model does not consider the many mixed bloods who did not become employees of the Hudson's Bay Company.

During its first century of operation, few mixed-blood children grew up within the confines of the Hudson's Bay Company's posts. Not only were intermarriages (or less formal relationships) officially prohibited, but Indians were not allowed to live in or even linger at and visit the posts after the trade process was complete. The home guard Indians who lived adjacent to the forts were doubtless largely composed after a time of mixed bloods whose white parentage was often not formally acknowledged. Only prominent officers seem to have been able to disregard with impunity sanctions against liaisons with Indians, and to formally recognize their mixed-blood families (See Table 1).

Andrew Graham, a long-standing chief of York Factory, produced a family of mixed-blood children, at least two of whom he sent to Scotland. His remarks about mixed-blood children are illuminating: 'The Englishmen's children by Indian women are far more sprightly and active than the true born

natives, their complexion fairer, light hair and most of them fine blue eyes. These esteem themselves superior to the others, and are always looked upon at the Factories as descendants of our countrymen' (Williams, 1969). Graham's view of mixed bloods was not held universally. In particular, the governor and committee in London can be seen as holding a different view. For example, two mixed-blood employees of the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1780s decided to quit the service because they were not permitted to keep women within the fort. To have allowed them their request, the London committee declared, 'would have been a precedent big with the worst consequences as well as a great breach of our Orders, and as they are sufficiently able to Maintain themselves as other Indians do, Therefore we Direct that they be not again received into our Service in the Factory, but Traded with, or Employed as other home Indians are.'<sup>12</sup>

The limited evidence available, then, suggests that some officials of the company regarded at least some mixed bloods more as Indians than as Englishmen. Nevertheless, the fact that mixed bloods were hired on contract at all indicates that they were not

considered strictly as Indians. In 1784 two natives of Rupert's Land were hired as labourers on the normal five-year contracts at the usual £6 per annum. The company added a proviso: 'in thus employing them as Englishmen, We do not however intend that they should ever be brought to England.'<sup>13</sup> Employees hired in Europe had their passage paid both ways as part of their contracts.

The isolated cases cited above were by no means the first mixed bloods ever hired by the company. Others, particularly the sons of prominent officers, had been received into the fur trade and risen to positions of reasonable responsibility (Rich. 1959: Vol. I. 645). Nevertheless it is possible that their rise in the company depended upon the nature of their education. Since no formal education was available in the Northern Department before the nineteenth century, those who came to occupy important positions had been educated in Britain.

A reasonable number of the mixed-blood sons of officers were able to find employment in their father's Company. Nor did they seem to have been subject to undue prejudice on the grounds of race. They were hired under contract and were paid wages similar to their English counterparts. Indeed, by 1806, the Hudson's Bay Company was making plans to promote the hiring of mixed-blood offspring of fur traders:

we have thought it would be adviseable to instruct the Children belonging to the Servants in the principles of Religion & teach them from their youth reading writing & arithmetic also Accounts which we should hope would attach them to our Service & in a few years become a small Colony of very useful hands.<sup>14</sup>

Without doubt, the mixed bloods were seen in such a positive light because recruits from Britain were becoming hard to get due to war and what the company considered to be exorbitant demands by its European servants. During the remainder of the competitive period, that is, until 1821, native employees became increasingly common in the Company's employment records.<sup>15</sup>

However, the post-1821 period presents quite a different picture. By this time enough mixed-blood children of fur traders had grown up in the Northern Department that in the Red River and Pembina areas they formed a majority of the population. Many had been employed by either the North West Company or Hudson's Bay Company. Although they were

notably absent at the extreme top, they had held positions at almost all levels of employment.

The coalition of the two fur-trading companies set in motion a new, more rigid hierarchy. Among the officers in the 'new concern,' no chief factors were mixed blood, but two of the twenty-eight chief traders were born in the Indian Country. Both were sons of William McGillivray, without doubt the single most important North West Company representative. Of the 140 clerks – the lowest rank of gentlemen – sixteen were natives of the country.<sup>16</sup> Many more were employed in the ranks of servants. Others were among those discharged at the union who were creating 'a nuisance' at Pembina, and who, according to George Simpson, newly appointed governor of the Northern Department, could not be 'a more worthless set of people.'<sup>17</sup>

This attitude was an ominous portent for the mixed-blood employees of the fur trade. During the period immediately after the merger, the young and inexperienced George Simpson became the most powerful fur trader in the entire Northern Department. He appears to have brought with him strong prejudices against all native peoples. The following statement is only one of many that could have been chosen to illustrate Simpson's feelings about mixed bloods, especially those at Red River:

The half breed population is by far the most extended about the Settlement and appear to require great good management otherwise they will become in my opinion dangerous to its peace.... their notions of pride and independence are such that they will not enter the service and moreover they are not the class of people that would be desirable on any terms as they are indolent and unsteady merely fit for voyaging, under those circumstances it is necessary to watch and manage them with great care otherways they may become the most formidable Enemy to which the Settlement is exposed.<sup>18</sup>

Governor Simpson perceived the mixed bloods as a single unit or group, belonging at the bottom of the social scale. He seemed to be quite unaware that some had served in responsible, prestigious positions, and still had high ambitions. Despite his expressed scorn for mixed bloods, however, Simpson soon made provisions for their reintroduction as recruits. Indeed, he proved quite willing to use them along with Indian employees to control the demands of imported labourers (Judd, 1980). Some were

<sup>13</sup> HBCA A 6/13, fp. 95, pgh. 9

<sup>14</sup> HBCA A.6/7, fo. 81f, pgh. 21.

<sup>15</sup> See HBCA A.30/16

<sup>16</sup> HBCA B.239/f/12, fo. 1-7, B.239/f/13, fo 1-6.

<sup>17</sup> PAC, Selkirk Papers, p. 7759

<sup>18</sup> HBCA D 4/87, fo. 8-9f.

hired on contracts ranging from three to five years, as had been previous practice.<sup>19</sup> and others on a seasonal basis to man the company's boats. Simpson perceived the mixed bloods as similar to the Indians in terms of their employment opportunities. Yet he was willing to continue the practice of hiring mixed bloods contractually as well as seasonally.

With the advent of schools at Red River, Simpson believed that the place should soon become 'the best nursery for the service.' But even in this optimistic vein, he promoted mixed bloods merely as 'boat and Canoe men, and winter travellers,' and with experience, workers at the posts.<sup>20</sup>

Simpson's attitude is reflected in the lists of officers for 1832. Of the commissioned officers, three were of mixed blood. All of these had been brought as commissioned officers into the new company in 1821. Nineteen mixed bloods were clerks, most of these were in the Southern Department where they were needed to combat opposition. Only four were stationed in the Northern Department, and all of these had been hired before 1821, that is, before Simpson had become prominent. Three of the four were sons of important profit-sharing partners; the last was the brother of Simpson's second-country wife (Judd, 1978).

Thus, in the early post-coalition period newly recruited mixed bloods who might earlier have aspired to decision-making posts were now largely forced to work only in labouring capacities. At the lowest levels of the hierarchy, however, the mixed bloods of Rupert's Land became ever more prominent. In 1832 about 20 per cent of the servants were mixed bloods, but that proportion rose to about 50 per cent by the 1850s. In addition, a significant number of mixed bloods were hired as seasonal labourers to serve much the same function as the Indians who were so employed.

Because few if any of these people left their own record, it is difficult to comment on the apparent injustice of this system. The written records left few clues to the expectations, needs, and ambitions of the mass of people. Perhaps many mixed bloods who entered the system under the terms just discussed expected nothing more. Perhaps many mixed bloods were happy to be buffalo hunters who were able to earn a little extra money by tripping in the company's boats in summer. Perhaps many did not want to make the decisions, balance the books, or oversee the men at the fur-trade posts.

There are, however, ample indications that the system did not run as smoothly as the company would have wished. Many of the problems appear to have been due to the frustrations of the workers. There were three major kinds of expressions of alienation in fur-trade society: desertions, mutinies on the transport lines, and pressure by the sons of officers to themselves gain admission to the officer levels.

As early as the mid-1820s desertions were common among mixed-blood employees. Because they had been born in the country and had many relatives, they knew the land and were easily sheltered from the agents of the company who might come looking for them. Therefore native men who left the company without being discharged were difficult to catch and difficult to punish. In later years, especially in the 1850s, it became difficult to hold York boatmen to the terms of their contract. Their poverty was such that the company gave advances upon signing in December, another advance upon embarkation in May, and only one third of their wages at the completion of the season.<sup>21</sup> By eliminating the usual threat of fines and withholding wages, the company had little control over the men's behaviour. More research is necessary to learn whether desertions were a constant annoyance or whether they became increasingly commonplace at the same time as other labour troubles were becoming more common.

By manipulating the locally available labour force whose limited options forced them to work for the wages supplied, the company could fend off the demands of Canadians and Europeans.<sup>22</sup> At the same time it depended more and more on native labourers who came to dominate the running of the transport lines. By the late 1850s the company was beginning to realize it had created a double-edged sword. Natives who ran the transport system were beginning to flex their collective muscle.

Mutinies became commonplace. They occurred to protest the lack of proper food, the danger of being icebound, and the unremitting backbreaking labour on routes with many portages and heavily laden worn-out boats. Indeed, mutinies were bringing the entire transport system to the brink of collapse. In many ways the company was at the mercy of its low status mixed-blood and Indian labourers (Judd, 1980). As a way out of its trap, the company turned in desperation to modern steam-powered boats that

19 HBCA D 4/88 fo. 56

20 HBCA D 4/90, fo. 9f. pgh 7

21 See for example, HBCA B 235/b/7 fo. 19. Wm McTavish to Chief Factors and Chief Traders, Fort Garry, 9 Dec 1859

22 HBCA D 4/100 fo. 2

would free it from some of its dependence upon the local men. This solution, too, was fraught with difficulties.

Mutinies and other forms of resistance were means of voicing anger and frustration with the Hudson's Bay Company's labour system. The underlying motives for the unrest do not find their way into the company's accounts; the root of the discontent may well have been the policy of allowing mixed bloods, particularly the sons of servants, access only to the lowest levels of employment.

The sons of servants who were shunted to the bottom levels of company employment, however, were not the only people dissatisfied with the company's hiring practices. The sons of officers suffered acutely from the policy that effectively excluded them from the upper ranks of employment. In 1831 Rev. William Cockran of Red River noticed that most sons of officers were 'living on the wreck of their father's fortunes.' (Foster, 1973: 167). A few years later James Sutherland expressed the acute frustration of a fur-trade father trying to help his sons earn a living other than 'by the sweat of their Brow'<sup>23</sup> which he considered to be beneath their station. In 1840 he wrote that he did not know what to do with one of his well-educated sons: 'I could get him in the Cos service, but halfbreeds as they are called has no chance there nor are they respected whatever their abilities may be, by a parcel of upstart Scotchmen, who now hold the power and Controle in the concern.'<sup>24</sup>

Many of the rising generation of sons of officers had fathers who were still prominent in fur-trade circles; indeed, many were important chief factors and chief traders. Perhaps for this reason, the Northern Council, upon which many of the fathers sat, was not totally unresponsive to the needs of the sons of commissioned officers.

First introduced in 1839, a new rank of apprentice postmaster was only formally admitted in 1844 through minutes of the Northern Council. Apprentice postmasters were engaged at £20 per annum for five years. If at the end of that time they were considered capable of becoming clerks, they entered a virtual second apprenticeship for three years at £30–50 per annum. A third contract was for three years at £75 per annum. Therefore, after eleven years of service, the people who began as apprentice postmasters were at last considered fully salaried

clerks. Those who were not believed to be capable of acting as clerks were made postmasters and paid according to the company's estimation of their abilities and responsibilities.<sup>25</sup>

Although not officially developed to accommodate local mixed bloods, during its two decades of use all but one of its twenty-one candidates were identified in the engagement records as 'native.' Of these, nineteen were the sons of chief factors and chief traders, and some were accepted while their father sat on the Northern Council.<sup>26</sup>

Despite being an apparent attempt to meet the needs of mixed-blood sons of officers, this rank caused as many problems as it solved. Seen as discriminatory, it annoyed many of the young natives and caused concern among their fathers. Donald Ross, although himself the father of white children born in the Indian Country, complained soon after the position was introduced: 'it has acquired so much notoriety, and is looked upon with such a degree of contempt, that even those possessing the most ordinary capacity or pretensions can hardly feel happy or contented as members of it' (Judd, 1976: 344–6). In 1857 James Anderson lodged another vigorous protest against this rank:

These young men are generally the sons of your oldest and most faithful officers and on an average are fully as talented and well educated as the apprentice clerks from Europe and Canada and tho' they do precisely the same duty they are degraded to a lower rank, pay and allowances .. This glaring injustice must – unless they be more than human beings – rankle in their minds, particularly in the minds of those of high spirit and superior ability.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the complaints, from the twenty-one appointments to the post fully fourteen were made clerks and at least three, all sons of Chief Factor Richard Hardisty, became profit-sharing partners. During the period under study the company also engaged a select few as clerks, essentially to buy off their potential opposition. At least six others were engaged at the higher level of apprentice clerks on an equal footing with Europeans. All of these were the sons of especially active and prominent chief factors.

James Ross observed upon the death of his father, Alexander, in 1856, that 'it seems generally the case

23 Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Sutherland Papers, James to John Sutherland, Red River Colony, 10 August, 1841

24 *Ibid.*, James to John Sutherland, Red River Colony, 10 August, 1840

25 HBCA, B. 239/k/2, 109th resolve, Minutes of Council, 1844

26 HBCA, B. 239/k/2, Minutes of council for 1841, 1843, 1849

27 PAC, James Anderson Papers, MG 19 A 29, McKenzie River District Report, 1857, p. 127



that halfbreed families dwindle into insignificance as soon as they lose their head.<sup>28</sup> The evidence would suggest, however, that without an active and prominent officer-level father to further their careers (usually coupled with an education gained outside the Northern Department) mixed bloods seldom rose above the servant level of employment. Therefore, most had little status to lose upon the death of their father (Brown, 1978).

James Ross asked rhetorically, 'What if mama is an Indian!'<sup>29</sup> What indeed! Having an Indian or even a mixed-blood mother with few exceptions meant that the child, if he remained in Rupert's Land and sought his career within the company of the chief employer, was regarded as fickle, indolent, potentially dangerous, good only for travelling in boats, and never capable of leading men or administering property.

This image is perhaps best illustrated in the writings of Alexander Ross, father of a large mixed-blood family. Calling the bulk of the mixed bloods a gypsy-like group, but generous, warm-hearted, brave, and usually quiet and orderly, he continued, 'they are, unhappily, as unsteady as the wind in all their habits, fickle in their dispositions, credulous in their faith, and clannish in their affections...' (Ross, 1856: 242).

Thus, the career and status model for mixed-blood employees of the Hudson's Bay Company in the Northern Department must describe a major trend downwards at the same time as their numbers in the labour force were growing significantly. All of the sons of servants, the under-employed educated sons of officers, and all of the Indians who worked for the company found themselves restricted to the lower strata of fur-trade society.

The model must also account for a small group that managed, by being born into the right families and through perseverance and talent, to work themselves into positions of power within the hierarchical structure of the Hudson's Bay Company. These few individuals managed to overcome negative racial attitudes and find a comfortable measure of success and status in the social structure of the white-dominated fur-trade society of the Canadian west.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that before the major reorganization of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821 natives, both Indians and mixed bloods, were able to attain reasonable occupational positions within the

company. Indians were guides, interpreters, and canoebuilders as well as labourers and canoe men. They were, however, hired only for the season and not under the usual three to five-year contracts. Mixed bloods were able to become administrators such as clerks and even factors and to serve under regular contracts. Their salaries were also equal to those of their European counterparts.

Racial stereotyping that eventually doomed most natives to the lowest rungs of fur-trade society became fully developed only after 1821. Natives were seen to fall within limited parameters of potential capabilities. They were confined largely to low-status labouring positions such as boatmen and labourers. Some, however, were trained as tradesmen, the elite of the servant group.

The lack of alternate employment opportunities permitted the company to exploit its native employees by hiring them at low wages. This factor became important when rising wages in other areas created difficulties in recruiting Canadians and Europeans. The company relied ever more heavily on local workers to fill labouring positions. At the same time, the company became vulnerable to the demands of these workers, who came to dominate the vital transport system. By the end of the period under study the hierarchical structure of the company was crumbling. Radical measures had to be employed to recover some balance, but natives were not usually the beneficiaries of change.

The components of fur-trade society do not fit easily into standard definitions of class structure, and I have avoided describing the social situation in terms of class. Even the most wealthy and privileged officers were primarily employees of a company, who merely set themselves apart by their affluence, gracious living accommodation and influence. By the same token, the standard concept of a property-less working class is largely meaningless in the context of the fur trade, and the servant levels did not constitute a proletariat. Clearly, however, the company had an employment hierarchy with rigid divisions which were next to impossible to cross. Hence a class-like situation existed, indeed it would possibly be appropriate to speak of a servant class and an officer class of employee. In this case the idea of 'class' would conform more closely to social stratification by employment than to a Marxian concept of class. Since the Hudson's Bay Company was the most vital economic force in the geographic area of the Northern Department its employment hierarchy extended into the society at large. Hence, an

28 Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Alexander Ross Papers, letter 203

29 Ibid

individual's status in the community was closely related to his status in the company.

One might therefore speak of the fur trade as developing a similar 'two-class' society at large. This occurred particularly after 1821. Previously the 'class' division had been blurred. Individuals could move back and forth between the 'classes' with relative ease. After 1821 the division became pronounced and movement between the 'classes' largely ceased. Native employees were quickly relegated to the servant 'class'; only a few were able to acquire more than marginal status in the community. For the first time in the history of the fur trade ethnic derivation, 'class,' and status were intertwined. For the first time, it meant that as a native employee of the Hudson's Bay Company one was with few exceptions also a low-status member of the servant 'class.'

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