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Men of the Fur Trade, ca. 1620-1770s



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The year was 1736, and two canoes quietly paddled across the water of the Niagara River illuminated only by moonlight. The canoes' pilots moved slowly and silently and slipped beyond the gaze of Fort Niagara which was perched on a small outcropping on the east bank overlooking the mouth of the river. The canoes' occupants – a French fur trader by the name of Joseph LaFrance and eight of his friends from the Iroquois tribe – proceeded cautiously, wary of the penalties they would face for their illegal smuggling venture if detected by French authorities in the fort. The commander would likely have had them all thrown into chains and confiscated their valuable bounty of furs for the Crown's profit. The group quietly glided through the shadows – the striking torch lit figure of Fort Niagara looming over their backs – and into Lake Ontario, deftly avoiding notice. They soon crossed Niagara Falls and continued toward their ultimate destination, the British Fort at Oswego. There, Joseph LaFrance – seeking a greater profit than trade with the officials of his home country could offer – waited in the forest near the fort while his Iroquois companions negotiated with British officials and merchants to secure the profit LaFrance desired from his furs. Once his furs had been sold, LaFrance and his companions returned the way they had come, making another long canoe trip to LaFrance's usual stomping grounds near Fort Michilimackinac. Joseph LaFrance's story is not an unusual one. In fact, in many ways, LaFrance embodies the experience of a typical fur trader operating in North America during the colonial period. He professed no attachment or loyalty to his country and undermined its profits as he sought to multiply his own – as so many others did.

British and French fur traders in the 17th and 18th centuries navigated a complex world dominated by imperial politics and intercultural conflict accompanied by near-constant danger. While frontier fur traders generally sought profit before all other considerations when trading with Native Americans, the experiences of fur traders associated with the British Empire differed significantly from those aligned with France. These differences resulted both from the divergent objectives of British and French colonialism in North America

and from the variety of cultural differences amongst the tribes who traded with the Europeans. Imperial officials aimed to control the lucrative profits of the fur trade through various forms of regulation, which traders from both empires frequently resisted with independent action. Further examination reveals that the French *coureurs de bois* and British traders exhibited much greater agency in making important decisions than one may expect. French traders enjoyed significant autonomy at the point of exchange; decisions they made on the spot carried substantial ramifications on the relationship between France and the tribes trading with them as well as the overall health of the trade. British traders – whose trade was generally confined to posts – ventured beyond British borders and set up their own trading posts outside imperial regulations. This paper examines how the structural differences between the British and French fur trades and the numerous objectives of native villages coupled to create an environment in which fur traders could act as independent actors, though they emerged in different forms.

Scholarship surrounding fur traders focuses primarily on a macro-level analysis of the frontiersmen and how they operated within an imperially dominated exchange network. Scholars tend to discuss fur traders primarily within the context of the European fur trade in North America, presenting them as the furthest extensions of imperial policy, and merely the cogs in an imperial fur machine. This Euro-centric perspective neglects much of the agency that fur traders exhibited in their individual interactions with Native Americans, which often took place hundreds of miles from the nearest official. This approach also fails to discuss the significant effects that the personal relationships and interactions of individual fur traders had on their countries relationship and policy toward native peoples. While existing scholarship provides valuable knowledge regarding the overall health and functioning of the fur trade from a variety of perspectives, no work seems to be specifically dedicated to presenting a fully comparative view of fur traders in British and French North America.

Most authors primarily deal with either the British, French, or Native American

perspective of the fur trade focusing their greatest efforts on one or two over the other(s). For example, Eric Jay Dolin's book *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* provides an excellent overview of the history of the North American fur trade. While he does touch on the actions and motivations of individual tribes, his work is largely focused on British and French perspectives.¹ On the other hand, Richard White's book *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* offers an in-depth discussion of the intense cross-cultural dialogue facilitated by the fur trade. However, his work emphasizes primarily the perspectives of tribes in the trade and does not direct much effort toward discussion of the traders' agency.² These two works are representative of many approaches taken by fur trade scholars.

Three major players dominated the North American fur trade: a great number of tribes – whose interests were not always aligned but often similar – the British, and the French. Though the degree to which they became economically dependent upon Europeans and their trade goods continues to be a matter of debate, as historian Daniel K. Richter noted, the trade became “absolutely crucial” for Native Americans seeking a number of essential commodities.³ Longtime French trader Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de La Vérendrye noted that “powder, ball, tobacco, axes, knives, chisels, and awls” were among the most highly desired goods by many tribes.⁴ In the early years of the fur trade, then-scarce European goods often carried a symbolic value rather than a solely practical one and many societies bestowed significant prestige and influence upon their brethren who possessed and subsequently traded away these goods.⁵ Thus, as Richard White asserts, rather than imposing economic dependence on Native Americans, European goods became “a cultural necessity” long before they arose as a material one.⁶ However, as these goods became more common among the tribes of North America and spread further west, the crafting and hunting traditions that these goods either made obsolete or much easier gradually faded into distant memory if they were not forgotten entirely.⁷ While many tribes did rely entirely on direct trade with Europeans early on, this dependence existed only in an economic sense; most of these tribes remained politically independent of New France and the British colonies.

Individual tribes exercised significant autonomy and influence in the fur trade dynamic and frequently played European powers against each other in favor of their own agenda. For example, the Assiniboine and Cree tribes of Upper Canada enjoyed a trade monopoly after the 1720s as the middlemen of all trade coming into the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Bourbon, as well as many of the numerous French trading posts nearby. These tribes enforced and expanded their grip on this trade often through violence.⁸ They exchanged furs gathered from tribes beyond their own territory – such as the Mandan and Blackfoot – as well as their own for new manufactured goods with European traders. The Assiniboine and Cree would eventually return to the western tribes and exchange their moderately used European goods for a new batch of furs and repeating the process regularly.⁹ Any group wishing to make the long trek through their territory to the post at Fort Bourbon – also known as York Factory – had to be escorted by members of the tribe.¹⁰

After obtaining furs, the Assiniboine and Cree tribes could trade them with either the French or the British. Though these tribes were generally aligned with the English, a significant number of these middlemen chose to divert their trade to nearby French traders.¹¹ They could obtain different kinds of goods from each partner and in turn exchanged different types of furs with each of them.¹² Therefore the Assiniboine and Cree exerted tremendous influence as the central, pivotal powers in this area of the fur trade.¹³ This level of political – and often economic – independence was not unique to these tribes nor to tribes who traded with the English. Most tribes engaged in the fur trade wielded substantial autonomy and influence as independent political and economic actors in the dynamics of the North American fur trade.

Most Native American groups involved in the fur trade inextricably tied trade and exchange of any kind directly to personal relationships. One generally did not exist without the other.¹⁴ Most tribes insisted on establishing friendly relations by performing ceremonies of friendship and sharing food, drink, smoke, and exchanging other gifts with traders before the profitable trade could take place. This approach to trade stood in stark contrast to the European model of a business transaction, namely the act of buying and selling goods with strangers for some

arbitrarily valued currency.¹⁵ Moreover, the goal of many tribes in trade – with both Europeans and other tribes – was not to garner the greatest profit possible from the transaction but to ensure the satisfaction of all parties involved.¹⁶ In many native cultures involved in the fur trade, the accumulation of individual wealth was discouraged and very uncommon.¹⁷ Most Native Americans traded primarily to clothe and decorate themselves with European wool and trinkets, to acquire highly useful metal tools, and to resupply precious gunpowder and ammunition for their next hunt.¹⁸

The friendships of native villages extended only to individual traders and not necessarily to the European empire they hailed from. Most tribes in North America were only loose collections of villages who shared common culture, traditions, and bloodlines. As such, most connections with Europeans formed at a village level.¹⁹ Relationships between tribes and the European powers were largely built and maintained through the relationships of fur traders and village leaders. Villages often maintained independent relations with different colonies and enabled them to retain a degree of political independence.²⁰ One author compared fur traders to “the rungs of a ladder” because both “connected two parallel worlds and kept them from crashing together in a catastrophic collapse.”²¹ The fur trade could not function in the same way – if at all – without fur traders' personal dealings. The significance of their work granted them a significant degree of autonomy and leverage in dealing with imperial officials and village leaders which was often exerted to carve a greater profit for themselves.

The French and the British took vastly different approaches in responding to the trade customs of the tribes they traded with. The French generally met their trading partners on a cultural middle ground.²² They embraced the interlocked nature of trade and friendship with Native Americans and often turned it to their advantage. They traded with numerous villages across the *pays d'en haut*, the Upper Country – a term generally referring to the area of French influence north of the Ohio River Valley and into what is now Canada – cultivating not only revenue, but also alliances.²³ Friendly relations with several tribes – including the Algonquin, the Huron-Petun, the Potawatomi, and the Ojibwa, among many others – were crucial to the very survival of New France

as a colony, as it ensured some degree of stability and security within the fur trade.²⁴

French officials often deemed the political and military benefits of these alliances more important than the actual revenue generated by the trade fostering them. France reaped its profit in the fur trade from the sale of *fermiers* – monopolies granted to companies of merchants on the export of furs from New France. In other words, the French crown would buy their furs and only their furs.²⁵ Thus the health of the overall fur trade was most important to French officials.²⁶ As such, French officials frequently sold goods at a loss in order to force prices down to levels that allied tribes would be more satisfied with and to divert trade from the English.²⁷ France attempted to regulate the number of traders in the Upper Country by issuing licenses to individual traders known as *congés*.²⁸ While France could not directly control these illegal traders, officials could increase the number of *congés* in circulation, pressuring the *coureurs de bois* to conform to market prices and not to exploit Native Americans in exchanges.²⁹ These actions helped to improve the health of the overall trade and happiness of French trading partners.

France's broader colonial interests explain much of the nature of France's fur trade in North America. France never promoted long-term settlement in New France, and instead directed their efforts toward the flourishing fur trade and converting indigenous peoples to Christianity. Many more fur traders inhabited New France than traditional settlers: according to a 1625 report, only twenty permanent settlers lived in Quebec, and they were far outnumbered by fur traders in the area.³⁰ French historian Pierre de Charlevoix journeyed to Quebec in 1720 tasked with reporting back on the settlement's state to the Crown and stated that in terms of infrastructure one "might reduce it to the rank of our smallest cities in France" and noted "no more than seven thousand souls at Quebec."³¹ He went on in one of his many letters back to France to lament the lack of people in New France suggesting that the colony might be as successful and profitable as any other in North America if it were only sufficiently populated.³² France had little interest in large-scale agricultural development and rarely competed directly with native villages for game or fish. If they did, it was usually precisely focused and done with the express permission of the village who claimed the resource.³³ France's

focus on non-settlement activities meant that their demand for tribal lands and resources presented much less of a threat to Native Americans.

Most fur traders working in the *pay d'en haut* practiced the exchange technique characteristic of those traders operating in French territory known as *en derouine*.³⁴ This term refers to fur traders embarking on lengthy voyages from trade posts such as Fort Michilimackinac, Fort La Reine, and Montreal – where they purchased or traded for European trade goods – to villages deep in the Upper Country, where they traded those goods for prized beaver, bear, and mink furs, then returning to the posts to trade and sell them.³⁵ Fur trader Joseph LaFrance, according to an interview recorded by Sir Arthur Dobbs and published in 1744, made such annual round trips for a decade from his base at Fort Michilimackinac to a friendly village called Michipicoten just north of Lake Superior.³⁶ The near-constant, seasonal movement required by trading *en derouine* meant that fur traders were among the most well-traveled people in America; some estimates hold that Joseph LaFrance canoed over 17,000 miles throughout the Upper Country over the course of his career.³⁷ *En derouine* enabled traders to make the face to face contact necessary to facilitate and maintain long-term trading friendships with villages.

Coureurs de bois often encountered friendly villages willing to feed and house them along their journey, and fur traders frequently took this opportunity to foster new trade and friendship. Upon reaching a village, a trader was usually welcomed as a friend and engaged in the traditional friendship ceremonies before discussions of trade began. For example, French trader and explorer Nicolas Perrot found a warm and celebratory reception among the Miami and Mascouten of Green Bay.³⁸ Sitting him on a buffalo skin, they offered him the *calumet*, a traditional pipe of peace and friendship, and food after which a village leader carried him into the center of the village on his shoulders. They housed and feasted him for over a week, trading and fortifying their new friendship.³⁹ After the ceremonies were complete, a trader might then exchange what goods and furs had already been gathered or arrange a later time to meet and gather the season's fur bounty, acquainting themselves with the surrounding lands and villages in the meantime, as La Vérendrye did in 1737.⁴⁰ The time fur traders spent living among

tribes provided the foundations of the friendships that were so crucial to the fur trade's success.

The lives of fur traders were not all tales of friendship and comfort. Traders journeying into the *pays d'en haut* faced an impressive variety of danger at every turn. As Joseph LaFrance found out, the tumultuous waters of Upper Country's many rivers presented the "utmost danger and difficulty in going by water."⁴¹ While their handmade birch-bark canoes were quite maneuverable and durable, the small crafts could not handle the more ferocious waves. Rough waters forced traders to disembark and carry their goods, furs, and boats overland to the next navigable point in the river. They were forced to stop and hunt frequently, as traders stuffed their meager cargo space with as much fur and valuable goods as they could.⁴² Fur traders also faced the threat of attack from unfriendly tribes. On his final trade venture to York Factory in 1740, LaFrance traded and celebrated with the Monsoni and Sturgeon tribes on an island in the Lake of the Woods where almost two dozen Frenchmen including La Vérendrye's oldest son had recently been slaughtered by a Sioux war party.⁴³ The fear of being violently raided and having all their stock stolen was quite prevalent among fur traders.⁴⁴ If they were to survive, fur traders had to forge their own means of defense against this threat, either through force or by strong friendships.⁴⁵ Successful fur traders realized the value of cultivating close relationships with Native American villages, and many attained positions of leadership and respect among them.

Many *coureurs de bois* were well-respected members of the native communities they traded with and valued for their primary connection to the European market. Many came to lead tribes in a number of ways. Some, like Joseph LaFrance, did so in an economic sense. In 1743, he led a large fleet of canoes from Cedar Lake to the English post at York Factory, bringing an estimated 50,000 beaver furs and 9,000 martin skins.⁴⁶ Some traders also took leadership in a military fashion. LaFrance led an attack against the enemies of some friends he had made at York Factory that failed miserably, while French trader Charles-Michel de Langlade led a substantial force of Ottawa and Chippewa warriors against the British post at Pickawillany and laid waste to the town and its inhabitants.⁴⁷ Some, like Peter Chartier, even achieved political leadership. Born to a Frenchman and his Shawnee

wife, Chartier entered the fur trade with the English. He built his influence among his mother's people and negotiated on their behalf before turning on the British and leading several attacks on British traders in 1745.⁴⁸ However, Chartier did not take up with the French. Instead, he stood for the Shawnee in negotiations with the French and resisted French orders to relocate the tribe further north.⁴⁹ Considering the plentiful opportunities for autonomy, authority, and profit available to a *coureur de bois* Upper Country, it is no wonder that they developed a strong sense of independence from imperial authority that prompted them to smuggle and divert trade to the British.

The strict regulations and harsh punishments that France attempted to impose on illegal trade and traders often served only to push their trade to the English.⁵⁰ This is likely what drove LaFrance to help lead that massive fur fleet – which included many of his own furs – to the British post at York Factory, rather than trading his furs with merchants at one of the nearby French posts. In 1737, three years before that trip, LaFrance canoed to Montreal in hopes of acquiring a *congé* and brought a large fur cargo for trade and valuable gifts for the governor-general, Charles de La Boische.⁵¹ The governor accepted his gifts but threatened to arrest and charge LaFrance with selling brandy to Native Americans. LaFrance managed to escape town but tried again a year later and was captured, stripped of his cargo, and his other belongings.⁵² Disenchanted with his trading partners, LaFrance set out on his journey to York Factory after a quick escape. LaFrance was certainly not alone in his disillusion with France's bureaucracy; two of the earliest and most famous French traders, Pierre Esprit Radisson and Médard Chouart des Grosseilliers, bristled against French regulations. After risking their lives to gather furs for the French in dangerous Iroquois territory in the late 1650s, they requested permission for another voyage.⁵³ The governor overburdened them with restrictions on this second venture, so they set out on their own terms and were arrested upon their return in 1663. The governor imprisoned and fined them, confiscating nearly all their furs. Upon their release, they quickly turned to the English and soon played foundational roles in the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company.⁵⁴ Thus, France effectively created its own greatest rival, which it continued to support by pushing French traders away with overly strict regulations.

While France and the *coureurs de bois* consistently made great efforts to meet their Native American friends on a cultural middle ground, the English hardly made an effort. They only embraced the connected nature of friendship and trade in a superficial way and only so long as they needed to. Instead of cultivating allies as the French did, the British sought to create subjects.⁵⁵ The growing English colonies soon had much more manpower than New France, so British traders did not rely upon friendships with native villages for security as the *coureurs de bois* did.⁵⁶ The English primarily traded with the Iroquois, Assiniboine, the Cree, the Shawnee, the Miami, the Pequots, and several other tribes across the Ohio River Valley and near Hudson's Bay.

These aggressive British attitudes are no surprise when one considers their broader colonial focus. In general, British colonial policy aimed to create large, permanent settlements and exploit the abundant resources of North America.⁵⁷ In the British colonies, settlers far outnumbered other residents such as fur traders. Farmers were especially prevalent, as the crown heavily promoted and rewarded the growth of capitalist agriculture in the colonies.⁵⁸ The British colonies contained well over ten times the population of New France at its height, and these settlers typically "feared and despised" Native Americans.⁵⁹ The animosity of English settlers largely resulted from the tension between them and the tribes who occupied the land they hoped to inhabit. With such a large population focusing their efforts toward acquiring land where they could establish a farm and settle their family, the English grated against the nerves of many native groups and presented a direct threat to their lands and livelihoods.

The British colonies often competed in the trade not just with the French, but with each other as well. As most tribes formed trade relationships at a village level, each British colony established and maintained its own independent fur trade.⁶⁰ Thus, the colonies in close proximity to each other naturally competed for the same pool of furs from local tribes. Such competition sometimes turned violent as in 1634 between the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colonies. Fur trader John Hocking sailed upriver from New Hampshire to one of Plymouth Colony's trading posts, fiercely determined to cut off the cargo being toted downriver by nearby tribes and take it for himself. He blatantly

ignored warnings from the post's leader, John Howland, and continued upriver, prompting Howland to gather a small group and chase him down.⁶¹ They found Hocking and his crew at anchor and began to cut his mooring cables so he would drift away. Hocking shot one of Howland's men in the head and was immediately killed in retaliation.⁶² Hocking's men retreated and soon complained to the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop. The colony was outraged, and Winthrop had a Plymouth magistrate – there entirely by happenstance – seized and imprisoned, holding him responsible for the events near the post.⁶³ Tensions between the colonies ran high, but they soon arrived at a peaceful solution. However, the event sparked an expansion of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's fur trade in Maine, and they soon strangled Plymouth Colony's trade out of existence.⁶⁴ Competition over the fur trade was ruthless even among countrymen.

While the *coureurs de bois* pushed further into western territory, the British colonies fortified trade closer to their borders. British fur traders generally did not travel to villages to generate trade. Instead, they insisted that Native American traders make the lengthy trek to trading posts and towns established along the frontier beyond the British colonies and near Hudson's Bay.⁶⁵ From these outposts, fur traders extended credit – in the form of trade goods – to native traders and middlemen, an investment expected to yield a profit the following spring in the form of furs. Traders often coerced Native Americans into signing away their lands as collateral in these exchanges.⁶⁶ The actual point of exchange between English traders and Native Americans operated much the same way as it did with the French; ceremonies of friendship and gift-giving took place before trade began.⁶⁷

English traders also faced significant danger in their work, as the trade posts they operated in were always under threat of attack. George Croghan, one of Britain's most prominent and prolific traders, witnessed a trader murdered by a seemingly friendly Huron-Petun after an insultingly low trade offer; he offered "but one charge of powder and one bullet for a beaver skin to the Indian; the Indian took up a hatchet and knocked him on the head."⁶⁸ The stationary nature of English trading posts made them convenient targets for any retaliatory attacks directed at the British in general. Frenchmen often took up arms with the Shawnee and Delaware

against encroaching British trading posts in the Ohio River Valley in the 1750s.⁶⁹ However, being somewhat fortified and often garrisoned, they were in a far better position to defend themselves than the French and their allies usually were.

Most tribes did not hold their English trading friends in the same esteem as they did their French counterparts. They certainly harbored some bitterness at the ever-encroaching waves of English settlers forcing greater numbers of Native Americans out of their homelands, but this was also due in some part to the very character of the average British fur trader. As one historian noted, “most of these traders were the very scum of the earth.”⁷⁰ Many were notorious for being cheats and crooks engaging in dubious trade tactics. British Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Johnson frequently complained that these “men of lowest means” manipulated weights when dealing with Native Americans to secure a better profit, casting a shadow on the reputation of all British traders.⁷¹ Traders working for the Hudson’s Bay Company frequently fiddled with their report numbers to increase their returns.⁷² While the French overall enjoyed a very familial, friendly trade, British traders were abrasive and often pushed trade away with their greediness.⁷³ Circumventing imperial trade regulations and exploiting tribes in trade was one of a few ways that English traders ignored their national loyalties.

The variations in the structures of the French and British fur trades led to different forms of independent resistance to regulation. While the *coureurs de bois* enjoyed enough autonomy to divert their furs to whichever merchants offered them the best price, British traders operated under more direct supervision at trading posts. Some of them went to extreme measures to secure their own profit, like Thomas Morton. Born in England, Morton arrived in North America in 1625, accompanying a venture intent on establishing a fur-trading operation on the Massachusetts Bay. After a harsh winter the captain, Wollaston, fled to the warmth of Virginia, leaving Morton behind to oversee the small outpost they had set up.⁷⁴ Morton had become enamored with New England, once remarking on its unparalleled beauty, calling it “Nature’s Masterpiece.” Smitten, Morton refused Wollaston’s orders to send more of his servants south. Instead, Morton coerced many of them to stay behind and join his new venture. Morton established

his own trading post on a nearby hill, eventually known as Merrymount. Merrymount was a post governed by few rules, and its members determined to enjoy life and reap a profit. Morton maintained close friendships with nearby villages and was reportedly enthralled by their way of life. He respected his native allies as “friends and co-conspirators,” a sentiment uncommon among British traders.⁷⁵

Merrymount traders primarily exchanged guns with local Massachusetts and Narragansett peoples for beaver pelts. Trade thrived and Morton’s profits soared.⁷⁶ The nearby Plymouth Colony found themselves disturbed by the “great licentiousness” of Morton’s crew and their antics, and the trade flowing through his post directly competed with their own, which was a vital source of income for the colony.⁷⁷ Even more egregious was Morton’s willingness to fraternize and trade in firearms with Native Americans, an act prohibited by English law.⁷⁸ Colonial officials issued a declaration to Morton in the spring of 1628, and warned him to cease his trade activities immediately, citing his violation of the King’s law. Morton defiantly replied that “the king was dead and his displeasure,” blatantly declaring his distaste for imperial control.⁷⁹ Later that year, colonial officials organized a small expedition to force Morton from Merrymount and destroy the trade there. They soon deported him back to England after a trial.⁸⁰ Morton had arrived in North America in England’s employ, exploited the imperial system to attain significant autonomy and profit, but returned to England as a prisoner.

In lieu of popular practice, some British traders did venture out to villages to generate trade. Two trade voyages by Hudson’s Bay Company employees Smith and Waggoner and William Pink offer details on such trips. Escorted by groups of friendly Cree natives on journeys from York Factory a decade apart, they hunted and trapped with their guides through autumn and winter, returning by canoe with a hefty load of furs in the spring.⁸¹ These experiences were not typical of English traders largely because wealthy merchants in Albany – whose goods were sold at trade posts across the colonies – heavily discouraged traders from venturing out to native villages, as they made far more money by containing trade to posts.⁸² British settlement efforts were also largely subordinated to trade development around the Hudson’s Bay area, meaning official supervision of the trade was also less prevalent.⁸³ The experiences of these

traders parallel those of the *coureurs de bois* practicing *en derouine* in a striking way. This suggests that the level of official supervision allowed for by the French trade system was a key factor in *coureurs de bois* being so independent.

A comparison of European trade systems reveals that the English enjoyed several advantages, but they also suffered from some crucial weaknesses inherent in their system. As mentioned above, the English manufactured higher quality goods than the French and could offer them at much better prices.⁸⁴ They also offered much better prices for furs; two independent reports found that the English paid around two to four times as much as the French for fur.⁸⁵ The restriction of trade to posts also allowed a great degree of imperial supervision over the course of trade, which gave England more control over exchange rates and profit margins. However, English insistence on making native traders journey long distances to British trade posts undoubtedly cost them a significant amount of trade, as distant tribes such as the Mountain and Blood tribes risked starvation with every trip to York Factory.⁸⁶ If they could not take their trade to the French, they were forced to trade through middlemen like the Iroquois, the Assiniboine, and the Cree, usually under worse terms. This, in turn, constrained the English fur supply to only the middlemen groups and those who sneak by them, giving the natives significant leverage while negotiating with them. The French did not have this issue, as the far-reaching *coureurs de bois* continually sought out new and diverse sources of furs spread across the Upper Country.

The most significant difference between the French and British systems is the degree to which they allowed for official imperial supervision of the actual trade. As the *coureurs de bois* penetrated further west, they removed themselves further from the watchful French authorities. Since most of their trade occurred in native villages, no officials were present to ensure the terms favored New France nor to ensure that the furs made it back to French merchants and brought profit to the crown. The English system kept trade tightly restricted to trade posts where it could be observed, recorded, and any credit involved could be guaranteed. Consequently, imperial officials could directly oversee rates of exchange, interest, and lending practices. In addition, the fur bounty never had to be entrusted to unsupervised traders and could be shipped directly to Britain upon acquisition from Native Americans. Therefore, the vast

distances that characterized the French trade were directly responsible for the significant autonomy afforded to *coureurs de bois*, enabling them to become “nationless” actors more frequently than British traders. In many ways, this relatively small group of men navigated a complex world of intercultural trade and imperial rivalry and wielded enormous influence over Euro-Native American relations and commerce.

Notes

1. Eric Jay Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2010). See also: James Axtell, "The White Indians of Colonial America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1975): 55–88; W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains : Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818: The Narratives of John Macdonell, David Thompson, Francois-Antoine Larocque, and Charles McKenzie*, The American Exploration and Travel Series (Norman, Okla: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Arthur H. Buffinton, "The Policy of Albany and English Westward Expansion," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 8, no. 4 (1922): 327–66.
2. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also: Daniel K. Richter. *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001); Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (University of Toronto Press, 2005).
3. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 50.
4. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 87.
5. White, *The Middle Ground*, 101.
6. Ibid.
7. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 51.
8. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 59.
9. Ibid., 91.
10. Ibid., 59.
11. Ibid., 69.
12. Ibid., 91.
13. Ibid., 69.
14. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 176. See also: White, *The Middle Ground*, 24–26; Wood and Thiessen, *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, 11–13.
15. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 176.
16. White, *The Middle Ground*, 98.
17. Ibid., 101; See also: Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 90–91.
18. White, *The Middle Ground*, 131.
19. White, *The Middle Ground*, 16-7.
20. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 171.
21. Ibid., 183.
22. White, *The Middle Ground*, 127.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 97.
26. Ibid., 115.
27. Ibid., 122; See also: Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 107.
28. Ibid., 97.
29. Ibid., 124.
30. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 35.
31. Pierre-Francois-Xavier de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North-America, Undertaken by Order of the French King : Containing the Geographical Description and Natural History of That Country, Particularly Canada: Together with an Account of the Customs, Characters, Religion, Manners and Traditions of the Original Inhabitants: In a Series of Letters to the Duchess of Lesdiguières*, vol. 1 (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), 111, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY112453592&srchtp=a&ste=14>.
32. Ibid., 1:122.
33. White, *The Middle Ground*, 341–42.
34. George William Colpitts, “Vice, Virtue and Profit in the Indian Trade: Trade Narrative and the Commercialization of Indians in America, 1700–1840” (Ph.D., diss., University of Alberta, Canada, 2000), 20.
35. Ibid.
36. Helen Hornbeck Tanner, “The Career of Joseph La France, Coureur De Bois in the Upper Great Lakes,” in *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991* (Michigan State University Press, 1994), 174.
37. Ibid., 181.
38. White, *The Middle Ground*, 6.
39. Ibid., 7.
40. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 37.
41. Dobbs, *An Account of Countries*, 30.
42. Tanner, “The Career of Joseph La France,” 180–81.
43. Ibid., 180.
44. Bruce M. White, “The Fear of Pillaging: Economic Folktales of the Great Lakes Fur Trade,” in *The Fur Trade Revisited : Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991* (Michigan State University Press, 1994), 206–7.
45. White, *The Middle Ground*, 57.
46. Dobbs, *An Account of Countries*, 43.
47. Ibid., 44–45. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 113.
48. White, *The Middle Ground*, 189–90.
49. Ibid., 190.
50. Verner W Crane, “The Tennessee River as the Road to Carolina: The Beginnings of Exploration and Trade,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 3, no. 1 (1916): 6.
51. Tanner, “The Career of Joseph La France,” 177.

52. Ibid., 177–79.
53. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 100–101.
54. Ibid., 101.
55. Ibid., 256.
56. Ibid., 317.
57. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 108.
58. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 184.
59. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 108.
60. White, *The Middle Ground*, 16–17.
61. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 65.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 66.
65. White, *The Middle Ground*, 318; Wood and Thiessen, *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, 9.
66. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 83.
67. Ibid.
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72. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 65.
73. White, *The Middle Ground*, 128.
74. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 49.
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77. Ibid., 51.
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79. Ibid., 52.
80. Ibid., 52–54.
81. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 40–44.
82. Buffinton, “The Policy of Albany and English Westward Expansion,” 328.
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