

# **Consequences of Contact**

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No one can argue that the European contact with North American Indians was at all pleasant for First Nations. Pre-contact there was inter-tribe trade, sustainable wildlife use as well as hard winters, primitive tools and First Nations spiritual beliefs. Post-contact the First Nations were introduced to European diseases, introduced to European iron products such as the axe and kettle, and were introduced to the Christian religion. The introduction of these things led to wide-scale death through disease, new reasons to create warfare as tribes battled over trading grounds, and in some cases religion and beliefs, there was also the benefits of a slightly easier life through iron tools. Historians continue to argue to what extent contact was either beneficial or destructive to the First Nations. Looking back at the situation from today's perspective with the knowledge of current First Nations circumstances and a broad knowledge of the history of contact, it is difficult to conclude that European contact with the First Nations of North America was anything but destructive.

Interaction with the First Nations, post-Viking contact really began in the 1530's with Jacques Cartier (though Cabot had visited Nova Scotia in 1498), when he traded with the First Nations, kidnapped some of them, and left them with the gift of disease which they had no immunity to.<sup>1</sup> Scattered contact continued until the 17<sup>th</sup> century mainly with east coast First Nations as European fishing boats frequented the shores to trade and whaling boats set up wintering camps.<sup>2</sup> All contact led to the passing of new disease to the First Nations. At Tadoussac, near the mouth of the Saguenay River, a permanent, year-round trading post was established in 1600, followed by Port Royal in 1605, and Quebec in 1608.<sup>3</sup> With the establishment of Quebec and the fur trade it was

clear to see that France was serious about the New World: “The French King, Henry IV, hoped by this to make good his claim to New France and to gain knowledge of the New World.”<sup>4</sup>

Pre-contact First Nations had a system of trade: “As early as 1615 the French noted that Huronia was the center of a well-developed system of trade...Trade with the north...brought in supplies of dried meat, fish, skins, clothing, First Nations copper, and charms”<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the Europeans did not introduce trade to the First Nations, in fact the First Nations had trade patterns and alliances in order to prevent war. When a trading relationship was established every effort was made to control feuds that may lead to war: “The payment that was made to settle a blood feud with the Algonkians was greater than made to settle a feud inside the confederacy and the dearest payment on record was made to the French in 1648 to compensate them for a Jesuit *donné* murdered by some Huron Chiefs”<sup>6</sup> The First Nations even sent or traded a few people to other tribes as a show of good faith. This custom seems widespread as First Nations children were sent to study and live with the Jesuits when trade relations were concreted with the French.<sup>7</sup> This will be discussed further in another section. When Champlain first encountered the First Nations in 1608 he was required to adapt the French trading system to that of the First Nations which included gifts of good faith, and much ceremony. The Hurons had a system set up to continue good relations in the face of turmoil; the French traders had to enter this system.<sup>8</sup>

The main advantages of trade with the French were the introduction of iron tools and equipment from Europe of which the First Nations had none. Pre-contact the First Nations used stone, bone and wood tools for their needs. With the introduction of iron

tools, the lives of the First Nations were made slightly easier. The introduction of these wares “has become to them an indispensable necessity...not so much for their novelty as for the convenience they derived there from.”<sup>9</sup> The First Nations received many ‘European’ goods from the traders including “tobacco, liquor, powder and shot (in later years), biscuit, peas, beans, flour, assorted clothing, wampum, kettles, and hunting tools.”<sup>10</sup> The problem with the acceptance of the new technology was that it was “incompatible with spiritual beliefs...(and) were accompanied by Christian religious teachings and French custom...First Nations religion lost not only its practical effectiveness” as traditional magical and animistic views of nature were replaced by the exploitive view.<sup>11</sup> It was true that cooking, chopping wood, and hunting and cleaning animals were made easier but the First Nations were in effect trading away their pre-contact culture.

Two other immediately recognizable problems with the First Nations trade with the French are the destruction of Beaver populations through over-hunting, and the introduction of alcohol. The latter problem will first be discussed. It is well known that Asiatic Mongols have very little to no resistance to the addictive powers of alcohol. Since the First Nations of North America came from Asia when Beringia was passable<sup>12</sup>, and they had no interaction with liquor until the French traded it to them, the results were not positive. “Liquor in particular brandy, was a favorite item of the trade—one which the Indians ‘would go a long way’. Its effects were devastating”<sup>13</sup> Liquor was blamed for an increase in death rate of the First Nations and a disintegration of social order: “the Indians became debauched and violent among themselves, and at times spilled over into the French community which they would rob, ravage, and burn.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly when the

French first traded alcohol to the First Nations, it was the beginning of something horrible.

The destruction of beaver populations is another sign of troubles in First Nations culture: “the year 1640 marked...the beginning of a crisis that was to destroy the Huronia. Beaver had become rare in the Huron country and most of the skins they traded...came from neighboring tribes to the north...A similar decline in...New York State seems to have reached a point of crisis by 1640.”<sup>15</sup> First Nations usually only sustain themselves on hunting, taking from the land only what they need. When trading began, the French convinced the First Nations that they needed everything the traders offered. Easy addiction to alcohol and the new dependence on iron tools led the First Nations to overkill beavers for their pelts which were being used for hats back in Europe. “This exploitation of beaver and other furbearers seems to have been most intense in the vicinity of major trading posts and among the First Nations tribes most affected by the trade...(many tribes) enjoyed an abundance of beaver in their territories.”<sup>16</sup> By mid-seventeenth century many areas were cleared of profitable fur-bearers, especially widespread was the lack of beavers. Some historians such as Peter Farb believe the drive to eliminate all animals was always there, the First Nations just lacked the ability: “But once the white traders entered the picture, supplying the Indians with efficient guns and an apparently limitless market for furs beyond the seas, the Indians went on an orgy of destruction.”<sup>17</sup> This view of course dismisses the First Nations spiritual connection to nature. Farb’s idea does have some merit though as the First Nations did seem to lay aside some beliefs and take more from the land than they needed, therefore creating overkills and receding populations in wildlife. All the reasons for this change in attitude

are impossible to comprehensively discuss in this paper, but Calvin Martin gives a plausible attempt at explanation in his paper. Many factors are however partly discussed in this paper.

Trade with the French added a new reason for tribes to go to war with each other: trade rights and territory for obtaining trade materials. The Hurons aligned themselves with the French very early in the history of contact, and their perennial enemies, the Iroquois aligned themselves against the French. “The Iroquois made the difficult but inevitable decision to embark upon a war they knew would be very long and destructive, and whose logic was utterly foreign to Amerindian thinking.”<sup>18</sup> The Iroquois feared the French and since the Hurons France’s allies, the Iroquois wanted to destroy them also. As the Iroquois continued their trade with the Dutch, and the Hurons with the French, supplies in certain staple trading furs declined (as discussed in the above section). The war that the Iroquois undertook had a new preoccupation after 1640: securing new sources of pelts. “The main controversy concerning their relations with their neighbors during this period centers on whether they were seeking to obtain furs by forcing the Huron to share their trade with them, or were attacking (them) in order to secure new hunting territories.”<sup>19</sup> The Iroquois also stopped other tribes from trading with the Dutch securing their own monopoly. Pre-contact the First Nations did constantly war, but with the addition of European goods, the lust for control of trading led the First Nations nations to wider-scale and longer wars instead of smaller wars.

Another consequence of contact between Europeans and First Nations Americans was the propagation of stereotypes in Europe. All un-Christianized peoples of the world were savages according to Europe and when explorers first brought back accounts of how

odd the customs of the First Nations were, there was no exception. “Much has been said about Amerindian cruelty and torture. As the Iroquois of that period were the prototype of the ‘cruel American Savage,’ they contributed...to the elaboration of that image.” This image was applied to all Amerindians.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the First Nations were treated as savages by all who came to deal with them. The mission was always to turn these peoples into a part of the Christian French population.

From the first years of contact, missionaries from the Recollets in the early years and the Jesuits of later times, the mission was clear: “the black-robbers would enlighten the Indians by ridiculing their animism and related taboos, discrediting their shamans, and urging them to accept the Christian gospel.”<sup>21</sup> The Missionaries would try everything in their power to shake the spiritual beliefs of the Indians and attempt to instill Christian beliefs and values. With the onslaught of terrible diseases, and the lack of ability of shamans to cure them, many First Nations accepted what the missionaries were teaching. Many soon repudiated the Christian beliefs when the deaths continued, but the missionaries were still able to carry out mass conversions. The French not only sent out missionaries to convert the ‘savages’ but also took them into their settlements to learn the Christian ways. As discussed in an earlier section of this paper First Nations tribes would send their children to Jesuit schools as a symbol of trust in trade. At these schools, which were similar to more recent ‘resident’ school of the 1950’s and 1960’s, the First Nations children were educated in French customs and Christianized. In 1639 the Jesuits constructed a permanent center for their missionary work in the Huron area. At Ste Marie, located near the geographic center of the confederacy the Jesuits were able to construct building of European design.<sup>22</sup> At this site the missionary work could continue

unabated, and the site acted as a religious retreat for converted First Nations and a beckon of European presence and technological superiority in the middle of First Nations land. This settlement was yet another stroke against pre-contact ways of life for the First Nations. The final way Christianization and conversion to western culture occurred is one that is ongoing today (though slightly different). That is the creation of reserves, the first of which Sillery was created in 1637.<sup>23</sup> These reserves isolated First Nations from the loose morals of Brandy traders and acted as centers of conversion.

The final and most devastating consequence of contact that will be discussed is that of the introduction of new diseases. The epidemics that thrashed First Nations populations were the most important of all consequences that led to the domination over the First Nations in the following centuries after contact. “Disease did more than decimate the First Nations population; it effectively prepared the way for subsequent phases of European contact by breaking First Nations morale and...by cracking their spiritual edifice.”<sup>24</sup> From first contact with Cabot in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the First Nations have been decimated by diseases that they have no immunity to. “When Jacques Cartier arrived in 1534, the Amerindians had already suffered from epidemic diseases brought by Europeans”<sup>25</sup> Clearly the disease spread to the First Nations from the Europeans had a very negative impact. The missionaries most embedded with the First Nations were under constant threat of harm because of the believed link between baptism and death to their children. In an effort to save the souls of the dying children, Jesuits constantly baptized the children with or without permission. When the child died some days later the First Nations believed it was the Jesuits fault.<sup>26</sup> Even with these suspicions Huron leaders would not allow the Jesuits to be harmed as the precious trade and peace

alliance was too important to be ruptured, more important than individual lives, a notion that seems quite counter to First Nations' beliefs. It is clear that even in the early ages of contact the First Nations were changing their moral codes and ways of life, even in the face of epidemics that were decimating their populations and leading to less people to control their ancestral land.

When one looks at all the positives, such as an easier day to day life with advanced tools, and large alliances, and all the negatives such as the death of large proportions of the population, humiliation of their spiritual beliefs, and more destructive wars that before contact were unheard of, it seems easy to conclude that contact for the First Nations of North America was overall a unhelpful experience. As disease decimated the First Nations populations it became easier for the French and English to control the bands as they were demoralized and looking for answers. The European lust for and self-assumed responsibility to spread the Christian word and 'civilization' led to the decimation of cultures that had been present in North America for at least eight thousand years. Looking back from today's perspective one could even conclude that life may have been better for First Nations if contact had never occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> Miquelon, Dale. *The First Canada: to 1791 Special Edition*. McGraw-Hill, Toronto, 1998. Pg 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pg 19.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid pg 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid pg 23.

<sup>5</sup> Trigger, Bruce. *The French Presence in Huronia: the Structure of Franco-Huron Relations in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century*" from *The Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. XLXIX, No. 2, pg 107-141, University of Toronto press, 1968. Re-printed in HI 220 Course Pack pg 46.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid pg 49.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid pg 49.

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- <sup>8</sup> Ibid pg 50.
- <sup>9</sup> Martin, Calvin. *The European Impact on Culture of A North Eastern Algonquin Tribe: An Ecological Interpretation*” from Reprisals in Canadian History Pre-confederation. Pg 3-26. Prentice-Hall, 1993. Re-printed in HI 220 Course Pack pg 14.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid pg 14.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid pg 15.
- <sup>12</sup> Miquelon, Dale. Pg 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Martin, Calvin. Pg 16.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid pg 16.
- <sup>15</sup> Trigger, Bruce. Pg 65.
- <sup>16</sup> Martin, Calvin. Pg 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid pg 3.
- <sup>18</sup> Soiu, George E. *The Destruction of Huronia*” from Reprisals in Candian History pre-confederation 2<sup>nd</sup>. Pg 17-34. Prentice-Hall 1996. Re-printed in HI 220 Course Pack pg 27.
- <sup>19</sup> Trigger, Bruce. Pg 66.
- <sup>20</sup> Soiu, George E. Pg 31.
- <sup>21</sup> Pg 13.
- <sup>22</sup> Trigger, Bruce. Pg 64.
- <sup>23</sup> Miquelon, Dale. Pg 33.
- <sup>24</sup> Martin, Calvin. Pg 11
- <sup>25</sup> Soiu, George E. pg 25.
- <sup>26</sup> Trigger, Bruce. Pg 63

### **Bibliography**

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