



# NO GOING BACK

**A**ll of the voyageurs and traders and posts and factories would have been useless without hundreds of thousands of furs. And those furs existed because of the skills of the Indigenous people who hunted and trapped the animals and prepared the pelts for trade. It's unlikely Europeans on their own could ever have found, trapped, hunted, transported and processed the animals whose pelts were so desired back home. The knowledge and abilities Indigenous people had were crucial.

Yes, Indigenous people got new and helpful items in exchange for furs. But the fur trade also changed their lives forever, in ways the first hunters offering beaver pelts couldn't have imagined. We'll never know what Canada would have been like if traditional Indigenous trading patterns and ways of life had been able to continue on their own, without disruption from the fur trade.

Before the fur trade, Indigenous people saw animal skins and furs as valuable because they could be used to make clothing and shelters. When Europeans came to trade useful objects in exchange for furs, it changed the way Indigenous people related to the land and its animals.

The strongest men and women were often so busy supplying furs that they had little time left to hunt for food and care for their own families. And if a trade mission failed, many would starve. Indigenous groups that had mostly left each other alone started fighting over control of territory and the fur-bearing creatures living there.



Contact with European traders could be deadly for Indigenous people, whose bodies had no defences against illnesses the traders brought without meaning to. Smallpox, measles and the flu killed thousands of Indigenous people starting as early as the 1630s.

Pemmican, the fuel of the fur trade, required bison meat. That led to over-hunting of bison, which had been a source of food for thousands of Indigenous people on the prairies.

Over time, many Indigenous people came to depend on the fur trade for food, money and even medical care. They lost the old ways that had worked for so long because they had devoted so much time and energy to supplying the fur trade. Some cruel traders took advantage of Indigenous trade partners by giving them too much alcohol. Pelts could also be traded for guns and bullets, meaning that old rivalries between Indigenous groups became deadlier than ever before.

When HBC sold Rupert's Land — a huge area covering about one-third of modern Canada — to the new country in 1869, nobody bothered asking the Métis and other Indigenous people living there how they felt about it. Their anger led to the Red River Resistance, which in turn led to the first Treaty talks.

## WOMEN WORKERS

The fur trade wouldn't have existed without non-stop work by Indigenous women. They made snowshoes, moccasins and all kinds of clothes. They repaired canoes, planted and harvested corn, chopped firewood, prepared animal skins and pelts for sale, washed clothes and cooked meals. They also made the all-important pemmican. Because of their many skills, Indigenous women were allowed to work in fur trade posts, places where European women were not allowed because life there was thought to be too rough for them. Men who worked for the fur companies often married Indigenous women, known as "country wives." No doubt many were truly caring relationships, but it was also cheaper for these men to marry Indigenous women than to pay them for all the work they did. The children of fur traders and Indigenous women were the first Métis people. Some of these marriages survived, but many men in the fur trade simply left these women and children behind when they returned to Europe, and married again.



**INDIGENOUS WOMEN WORKING AT YORK FACTORY IN 1800 MADE 650 PAIRS OF MOCCASINS FOR MEN TO WEAR THAT SUMMER.**