

Duncan Livingston of the North West Company

A little-known account of the death, in 1799, of Duncan Livingston, a trader of the North West Company, is presented in this paper together with a brief account of the historical background to the narrative.

Lake Athabasca, the Upper Peace and Slave rivers, and the shores of Great Slave Lake, were the exclusive habitat of the Dogrib, Hare and Slave tribes of the Athapaskan Indians in the aboriginal period^{1,2}. The Cree of the Algonkian linguistic stock began to migrate westward from the Hudson Bay region at the beginning of the eighteenth century under the influence of the fur trade^{5,6,7,8}. Armed with guns and seeking furs, they moved gradually into the territory of the Slave, Dogrib, and Hare, with whom they were involved in recurrent intertribal warfare over a period extending roughly from 1694 until 1791^{4,9,10,11,12}. These Athapaskan groups were displaced into the boreal forest along the Mackenzie river to the north of Great Slave Lake.

Although a few Dogrib, Hare and Slave may have occasionally gone to York Factory on Hudson Bay before 1717³, it was not until 1786 that traders of the North West Company began to establish trading relationships within Athapaskan territory. In that year, Peter Pond, then prominent in the affairs of the Company, dispatched Cuthbert Grant and Laurent Leroux to build a post on Great Slave Lake with the purpose of encouraging direct trade with these "Farr" Indians. The immediate success of this new post (Slave Fort or Old Fort Resolution) at the mouth of Slave River, led to the building of a fort farther north; in 1786, Roderick Mackenzie, also of the North West Company, constructed what later became known as Fort Providence, on the north shore of Great Slave Lake near the mouth of the Yellowknife river. A large number of natives from the country surrounding Lac la Martre were quickly drawn into the fur trade, and a temporary post was built on that lake in 1789. Before its establishment, the natives were obliged to make winter journeys lasting almost a month over distances of some 200 miles (over 300 km), back-packing their furs or dragging them on sledges¹³.

As late as 1789, the year of Alexander Mackenzie's expedition down the river which now bears his name, there were still groups of Dogrib and Slave Indians living along it who possessed no articles derived from trade. Mackenzie refers in his journal to natives he met four or five miles above the mouth of the Great Bear River who were still unac-

quainted with the use of tobacco and who did not possess iron¹⁴. Interestingly, the Mackenzie Eskimo to the north were already trading for iron, presumably with the Russians¹⁵. The prospects of trade led to the construction by Roderick Mackenzie, in 1790, of a winter post on a small island at the entrance to the Mackenzie river.

Through rather halting beginnings, regular trade was established at Lac la Martre, in 1793, to acquire command of the river¹³. Another post (Old Fort) was erected eighty miles below Great Slave Lake, on the right bank of the Mackenzie river, by Duncan Livingston of the North West Company, in 1796. Over a three-year period, a profitable trade was established with the Dogrib and Slave, and by 1799 Livingston was attempting to extend it to the Eskimo.

The fur-trade journals of 1800 and later contain conflicting reports on the ensuing death of Duncan Livingston, three Canadians and an interpreter. In most of them, it is suggested that the Eskimo killed Livingston's party about eight-days march north of Old Fort. It is fortunate that a differing, and more detailed account of their murder was recorded in one of the few surviving North West Company journals, formerly kept at Great Slave Lake.

On 15 December 1800, a Chipewyan trading chief, Grand Blanc, gave James Porter, another trader of the North West Company, an account of Livingston's death. Although the narrative is not always clear, it is apparent from it that Eskimos were not responsible for the murder of his party. Rather, Grand Blanc's story suggests that Livingston's Slave guides were the perpetrators. The Slave were often called Beaver Indians in the early journals and letters of the North West Company. This rare account of Livingston's death runs as follows¹⁶:

... Note — Cheenalizé or *Grand Blanc* gives this very strange relation as follows that the Red Knives [Yellowknife] who past the last winter and part of the proceeding Summer among the Beaver Indians [Slave] of McKenzie River had seen the place where the deceased Mr. Livingston and his people had been killed & that they found a great deal of Powder Shot & Ball Part of which they Brought along with them the latter articles was scattered over the ground & the Powder was covered over with a piece of the Bark of the Large Canoe of which were several with part of their Sails, Broke & Cut to small Pieces & Small pieces of Cloth that he calls Chief Cloth which appears to be some of Mr. L [Livingston's] coth[e]s that they had Cut up there he also says that it was not the Esquimaux that killed them Because they were never

known to have been so far up River for according to his account it is not a very Great Distance below the Fort at a place where there is a Great many Islands in the River, he says the Beaver Indians account is entirely false & the wounds he had thro the flesh or rather the Skin of his arm had been done by himself to make it appear as if he had been wounded by an enemy with arrows the better to conceal his Crime as an accomplice of the Bloody action — he likewise adds that the other two Indians who were along with them & reported to be killed are still alive & that one of them has a Gun & Kettle that he took away after the action the father of the same young man told this to the Red Knives who reside near Lac la Merde [Lac la Martre] that he told his son not to take away those things that belonged to the dead white people because they might bring him Bad Luck & Perhaps kill him but he would not be persuaded and carried them off nevertheless he is still alive with out any evil Consequences from the Gun & Kettle. the Red Knives would have told this to Mr. Thomson last spring but he having Pillaged their furs & treated them roughly they were afraid to Speak thinking / thro their simplicity / if he was to know that they had the ammunition that belonged to his dead relations that he would be still more exasperate against them consequently they Set off to their land & took the amm't along with them it is Probable they may Come here in the Course of this winter which if they do we shall Know the truth of the above assertion . . .

For the most part, the foregoing narrative reflects the unsettled conditions of the era. Traders penetrating into the vast region north of Lake Athabasca were beset with innumerable difficulties during the late eighteenth century. Spurred on by the intense competition of the fur trade, and encumbered by lack of satisfactory means of transportation and communication, the traders were forced to rely to a large extent on the local Indians for supplies and provisions. Although successful relationships depended on the individual abilities of the traders involved, who needed a long apprenticeship, fundamental matters of organization required all due attention. Following the murder of Duncan Livingston and his men, there occurred a gradual development of an elaborate supporting system of transportation, communication, and management which culminated in the amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies in 1821. By the early eighteen-thirties, the Indians had in the main become subject to its control.

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J. C. Yerbury
Department of Sociology and
Anthropology
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, B.C., Canada V5A 1S6

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