

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Aboriginal and European Marriages in Pre  
Confederation Canada

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In early Canadian fur trading society it was very common for Aboriginal women and European men to be wed. The main reason for these marriages was for the fur traders to have a socioeconomic relationship with the Aboriginal groups. There were many other reasons for the intermarriages, the first being that for many years the population was strictly Aboriginal groups and European men. Another reason for the marriages was that the Aboriginal women knew the land and had a knowledge on how to survive off it. After the filles du roi came to Canada, many Europeans left there Aboriginal wife or they began to practise polygamy. In this essay I will first discuss the main reasons for the relationships to occur. Second, I will examine the social as well as political issues attached to intermarriages. Third I will consider the different customs that Aboriginal and Europeans had to adapt too. Finally I will explore the events that followed the arrival of the filles du roi to Canada and how that effected the already made relationships.

During this time there were two main reasons for intermarriage in pre confederation Canada, the first one was out of necessity and the other reason was as simple as love. During the early years of the fur trade, the European settlers had a lack of knowledge on the land that they were now living in. Fortunately the Aboriginal peoples had a vast knowledge on the land and how to survive off of it. The women would do many different jobs for the men including making pemmican, snowshoes, tanning hides, gathering and drying berries and making moccasins.<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal women did not only do tasks such as gathering, but they also acted as translators, sources of

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<sup>1</sup> "First Nations Women in the Fur Trade." First Nations Women in the Fur Trade.. [http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE\\_8730771\\_M/my\\_files/module2/section1/lesson3/topic1.html](http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE_8730771_M/my_files/module2/section1/lesson3/topic1.html). (Accessed November 22, 2016)

crucial information and as guides for their fur trader husbands.<sup>2</sup> The Aboriginal women also had a vast knowledge on the plants in and around their area of residence, including which plants were edible along with medical properties.<sup>3</sup> During this time in history the population was estimated at about 3,000, with men outnumbering women almost six to one.<sup>4</sup> Many men found themselves in loving relationships with Aboriginal women who would help them push their careers as fur traders forward.<sup>5</sup> Although the wives of the fur traders are mainly thought of as sources of information and another set of helping hands, many of the relationships turned into love and care for one another.<sup>6</sup> The European men had many of the same aspirations with their Aboriginal wives as they would have with a European wife; to become married, and have a family.<sup>7</sup> Just because they had moved to a new foreign land they did not want their name to die.<sup>8</sup>

While their Aboriginal wives helped push their careers forward for many fur traders, there were also many repercussions that came from having interracial marriages. Many of the social issues came from the companies that were employing

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<sup>2</sup> "Aboriginal Women Fur Trade." On DeviantArt.. <http://whoisaenna.deviantart.com/art/Aboriginal-Women-Fur-Trade-145414028>. (Accessed November 22, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Yvette Lee. "Women of the Fur Trade." Women of the Fur Trade.. <http://louisrielinstitute.com/women-of-the-fur-trade.php>. (Accessed November 22, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Bonita Lawrence. 'Real' Indians and Others : Mixed-blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed November 2, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> "First Nations Women in the Fur Trade."

<sup>6</sup> "Aboriginal Women Fur Trade."

<sup>7</sup> Bonita Lawrence. "'Real' Indians and Others"

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

the fur traders; including the Hudsons Bay Company and the North West Company.<sup>9</sup> The Hudsons Bay Company requested for their traders to be more “self-reliant”.<sup>10</sup> One of the policies that HBC tried to enforce was to not allow Aboriginal women into the forts, and discouraged the men to marry. This policy epically failed.<sup>11</sup> While the North West Company had no problem recognizing Aboriginal women, and encouraged interracial marriages.<sup>12</sup> For many of the early years for both companies they needed the Aboriginal women to assist the men, but as the men learned how to do the tasks and became comfortable with the land the companies started to discourage interracial marriages.<sup>13</sup>

Along with the social issues that came with intermarriages, also came political issues. Many of the political issues only affected the Aboriginal woman. The women were the key for good European and Aboriginal relationships.<sup>14</sup> Although one issue that occurred was that women would loose there right to status.<sup>15</sup> Not only would the Aboriginal women loose their own rights to status by marrying a European man, but their children would also not be able to have status.<sup>16</sup> In aboriginal groups, in return for

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "First Nations Women in the Fur Trade."

<sup>12</sup> "Aboriginal Women Fur Trade."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Van Kirk. "From 'Marrying-In' to 'Marrying-Out': Changing Patterns of Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Marriage in Colonial Canada." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 2002., 1, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 10, 2016), p.1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

giving the fur traders sexual and domestic rights to their women they expected to receive advantages like access to trading posts and provisions from the Europeans.<sup>17</sup> While there were many issues that arose from intermarriage, the peoples who were in these interracial marriages had many changes that they had to adapt to.

The peoples who took part in these intermarriages had very different customs that they had to adapt to. While many they had were quite different they also shared some that were mutual; both Europeans and Aboriginal defined marriages as mutual consent, cohabitation, and public repute as husband and wife.<sup>18</sup> For women who married French men the women had to be Christianized and made to learn the gender roles of a peasant French woman to be a suitable wife.<sup>19</sup> From the Aboriginal point of view interracial union was a way of blending Euro-Canadian views into Aboriginal kinship networks.<sup>20</sup> Not only did Aboriginal adapt to their new ways of life but the European men often welcomed the Aboriginal customs with open arms.<sup>21</sup> The couples in the relationships had to learn an entirely new way of looking at life. After all of the different struggles that the couples have had to overcome were pushed to the side when the king's daughters arrived in Canada.

When the first ship load of the *files du roi* arrived in Canada the relationship of many Aboriginals and Europeans would forever be changed. Aboriginal groups openly

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<sup>17</sup> Sylvia Van Kirk. "The Role of Native Women in the Fur Trade Society of Western Canada, 1670-1830." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 1984., 9, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 10, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Sylvia Van Kirk. "From 'Marrying-In' to 'Marrying-Out'" p.2

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

would practise polygamy and divorce that was looked on very poorly by Europeans, but while married to Aboriginal many European men picked up these traits.<sup>22</sup> Some cases showed that the European men would keep a European wife at home with their children while when out trading furs they would have there Aboriginal wives with them.<sup>23</sup> During the 1800's after the kings daughters had come to Canada and the previously unknown land had become familiar the importance of Aboriginal women dramatically dropped.<sup>24</sup> The time when Aboriginal women were a necessity to all fur traders was now long in the past.

The relations between Aboriginals and Europeans were an essential part for the succession of fur trading in Canada. While both the men and women in these relationships had many obstacles in these relationships, many of them did end in love for one another. The Aboriginal women taught the Europeans how to survive off the foreign land. They helped their husbands make a successful career for themselves as fur traders, by packing animals, tanning hides and keeping them fed and clothed. Not only did the women conform to there husbands traditions but the men would also become accustomed to the lifestyles of the Aboriginals. The need for knowledge on these relationships in pre confederation Canada shines light on the amazing history that Aboriginal peoples have.

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<sup>22</sup> Sylvia Van Kirk. "From 'Marrying-In' to 'Marrying-Out'" p.2

<sup>23</sup> Yvette Lee. "Women of the Fur Trade."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

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