

University of Alberta

Orkneymen to Rupert's Landers:
Orkney Workers in the Saskatchewan District, 1795-1830

by

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Dedicated to the memory of my parents.



Above, the modern port of Stromness, Orkney islands, as the ferry leaves for the mainland Scottish coast. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Hudson's Bay Company ships stopped here to recruit young Orkneymen for work in Rupert's Land.

At left, a sign on the door of a Stromness house signifies the importance of the HBC to island life.

Photographs by Bruce White

ABSTRACT

The majority of workers in the Hudson's Bay Company, up until the mid-19th century, originated in the Orkney Islands, off the north coast of Scotland.

Historians have characterized these workers as an homogenous group—thrifty, sober, suited to work in cold weather and in the boats. Most worked for the Company for several years, saved their money and returned to their home islands.

My research into the lives and work of the Orkneymen of the Saskatchewan district, however, has revealed that a significant portion of these men remained in the North West. They adapted well to the environment of Rupert's Land, acquired useful skills including learning aboriginal languages, and, above all, many married native women and raised families, ultimately putting down roots in western Canada. My thesis focuses on this subset of men and the contribution they made to life in the early Canadian West.

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CHAPTER 1
Orkney Workers in the Saskatchewan District, 1795-1830
An Introduction

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thousands of men from the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland signed on for work with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). It was a mutually beneficial and long-running partnership: the fur trade company liked the sturdy, sober men they recruited on the islands while the workers found the employment in the Northwest to their liking. Most joined as labourers, although a few rose in the ranks to become officers. In Rupert's Land, most worked for several years, saved their money then returned to their native isles, where they invested in farms and island businesses. But others stayed in North America, married native women and raised families; later in the nineteenth century, some settled in Red River, and their descendants are sprinkled throughout Western Canada today.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine this latter group, the ones who stayed in North America. I argue that this group constituted a much larger percentage of Orkneymen in the country than has previously been acknowledged. My analysis indicates that the men who elected to stay in Rupert's Land had different employment trajectories and skills than those who only stayed a short time. As well, this subset of men established family ties with aboriginal and mixed-ancestry women, and these bonds bound them more securely and permanently to life in their adopted homeland. I argue that the combination of work adaptability and family bonds was a key influence in their decision to

remain in the country. In describing these men, my thesis will also provide an overall portrait of the Orkneymen in the Saskatchewan district, showing the diversity within their ranks and their ability to adapt to changing circumstances and a new environment. I also argue that, far from fitting into an ethnic stereotype, many Orkney workers diverged from the expected trajectory, proving versatile in both their work and at putting down roots in the Canadian West.

Although those Orkney workers who stayed and became a vital part of the fabric of the early settlement in the Canadian West have been acknowledged before, their story has not been fully told, and both their numbers and significance have been underestimated. Historians have examined the Orkney connection in a number of interesting but limited ways, highlighting changing recruitment policies, social interactions at the fur trade posts, status, workplace conflict and the origins of the men from the islands themselves. The historiography is not large: most studies of the fur trade discuss the Orkneymen in the context of fur trade labour, but few examine their significance as a specific group. Additional studies have touched on the Orkney role relating to fur trade marriage and family life, especially since the 1970s when the social history of the fur trade was expanded greatly. In particular, John Foster, Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer Brown, with their research into family life, the role of women in the fur trade and the formation of the Métis peoples, were among those who helped push fur trade history “out of old trails and into new directions.”¹ But many gaps still remain.

¹ Michel Payne, “Fur Trade Historiography,” in *From Rupert’s Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster*, edited by Theodore Binnema, Gerhard Ens and R.C. Macleod (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 5.

A survey of this historiography illustrates what research remains to be done. Michael Payne's examination of the social history of York Factory and Churchill deals with work relations, diet, health, recreation and conflict and status. At these posts, the Orkneymen were the major group: even after the 1821 merger, Payne noted, Orcadians dominated the workforce at York—22 out of 72 officers were from a parish in Orkney and about 40 per cent of the tradesmen listed Orkney as their place of origin.² By focusing on particular posts, Payne was able to provide a unique perspective on the Orkney workers, contrasting them to the workers from England or other parts of Scotland. Their clannishness, their relationships with each other and other ethnic groups, their status within the post and length of stay, were brought into focus.

As well, Payne examined the posts in terms of the contemporary hierarchy of society, the “social pyramid” of pre-industrial England, stressing the “graduated statuses” to which all men were subject.³ Wage and salary scales were rigid; even the seating arrangements in the chapel reflected the post hierarchy. Payne reiterated that fur trade posts were enclaves of expatriate Britons, particularly Orkneymen, up to 1870. “That the communities these men established reflected ongoing British cultural influences is rooted in this basic demographic fact.”⁴ But he argued that the HBC policy of “dispersed recruitment,” also a large part of Philip Goldring's study, showed that the posts were not merely fragments of British society, and that the presence of men from many backgrounds — Irish,

² Michael Payne, *A Social History of York Factory and Churchill* (PhD dissertation, Carleton University: 1989), vol. 1, 102.

³ Payne, vol. 2, 484.

⁴ Ibid.

Norwegian, Britain, and in particular from the native population — was also a defining characteristic of the posts. Payne’s study provides a context for the study of the Orkneymen—how they functioned at a major fur trade post and how they got along with other groups. What is missing in Payne’s work is a detailed study of Orkneymen as a separate entity, especially as they were dispersed inland. His focus on life in bayside posts, however, presents a useful contrast to the lives of inland servants, who will be described in my thesis.

John Nicks, in his article on Orkneymen in the HBC, studied the role of these workers from the perspective of the islands, rather than at the fur trade posts in North America, refining his research through parish records of baptisms, marriages and deaths, as well as HBC documents. He studied the specific origins of the men with questions such as: were some parishes more favoured than others? What level of the society did they come from? Why were so many willing to leave the island for service with the HBC? Nicks studied family and sibling relationships and looked for patterns. He observed that most of those recruited tended to be very young—some as young as 15, or at least under 18, compared to the voyageurs where studies showed a mean age of 26.⁵ His research revealed that many members of the same family would join up—in seven cases, three or four brothers worked for the HBC. More than 40 per cent of the employees were eldest sons. The average Orkney worker emerging from Nicks’s research was a young, unmarried man from the middle and lower ranks of the island society.

⁵ John Nicks, “Orkneymen in the HBC 1780-1821,” in *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Carol Judd and Arthur J. Ray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 112.

Economic motivation, the desire to earn a decent living, learn new skills and perhaps save for the future, emerged as important factors in Nicks's profile of these Orkney workers. Many of the young men were attracted by the wages, since they were considerably higher than the money they would make as farmers or labourers in Orkney. In the HBC, they would start off at least six pounds per year, with room and board paid for, and would learn new skills. Wages for a farm worker on the islands were just over two pounds annually. In the period 1780 to 1821, Nicks noted that most of the men served for 8 years or less, or the equivalent of one or two contracts, but about one-third of the long-service employees would come home for a hiatus, then sign on again with the Company, sometimes for life. Saving rates were high—most men who stayed between two and 12 years managed to save more than 70 per cent of their total earnings.⁶ Calculating the cost of a small farm in an Orkney parish, the price of livestock and first-year expenses, and, factoring in what an average returning HBC employee could save, Nicks concluded that buying farms was a realistic goal.⁷ This predilection towards farming is borne out in other histories of Orkney. In the late 18th century, Rev. Francis Liddell from the parish of Orphir publicly criticized the returning Company men for outbidding honest farmers,⁸ as well as for leaving behind their families in order to work abroad.

Nicks concluded that work with the fur trade was a “means to an end—a way of accumulating capital so that they might realize ambitions within their own

⁶ Ibid, 119.

⁷ Ibid, 122.

⁸ William Thomson, *History of Orkney*, (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1987), 214.

society.”⁹ His conclusions favouring economic influences in the Orkneymen’s choices are affirmed in his citation of wages and saving rates. Nicks’s work provided additional information about motivation—why the men signed on, and why they were inspired to return home. His work, however, says very little of those Orkneymen who stayed in the West.

Statistical reports on the Orkney islands in the late 18th century—the years of highest recruitment with the HBC—compiled by the ministers from each parish, shed light on population, occupation, wages, even the general health of its inhabitants. In reports on the economic prospects for each parish, the role of the HBC as employer was a primary consideration. It was observed that many areas were drained of their manpower as young men sought better jobs in the fisheries, the navy and the Company.¹⁰ Although the communities of the islands benefited from the remittances of the Orkneymen in the Northwest, and although many invested in the communities on their return, their dispersal to the New World was frowned upon by many Orkney leaders, particularly the clergy. These statistical records illustrate the poor economic conditions of the islands and help to explain why the men, limited by famine, poverty and poor job prospects at home, would seek their fortunes abroad. Agricultural methods, for instance, were considered to be a century behind those of southern Scotland,¹¹ and this backwardness was one of the reasons why the hardy Orkneymen would be willing, if not compelled, to

⁹ Nicks, 123.

¹⁰ J. Storer Clouston, ed. *The Orkney Parishes, A Statistical Account* (Kirkwall: W.R. Mackintosh, 1927), 194.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 21.

look elsewhere for employment and to adapt to new ways and methods to earn a living.

In his three-volume study of labour in the HBC, Philip Goldring presented an exhaustive examination of the Company's labour history, focusing on the period after the 1821 merger of the HBC and the Northwest Company; he included a detailed description of the alliance between the company and the Orkney islands – why the ships stopped there in the first place, for instance, why recruitment was successful, why the islands were such fertile grounds for hiring, and how and why agents were set up in Stromness, the port of call, to handle recruitment.¹²

Goldring disagreed with Nicks that enlistment was entirely an economic choice for the men in the Orkney islands. He cited the romance and adventure of the life in the “Nor West” and how the arrival of the ships was a major event. A festive atmosphere pervaded as the ships came in and young men travelled to Stromness to sign on. The islands, he wrote, were not a bad place to live, especially as agricultural conditions improved. He downplayed the poverty of the islands as a factor in Company recruitment, and pointed to other influences that gave Orcadians opportunities beyond their shores: widespread literacy and ongoing continental wars, which opened the islands to the world. The Orkney islands, Goldring wrote, was a stable and settled society where it was “worth a man's time to accelerate his earnings in his youth in order to have more money to

¹² Philip Goldring, *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1900*, Vol. 1, 2 and 3 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1979).

invest in farm stock and improvements in his more mature years. The islands may have been a good place to leave, but they were also not a bad place to return to.”¹³ Improvements to Orkney farming practices after the 1830s helped the economy. These changes probably helped explain the increasing difficulty the HBC had in getting enough recruits from Orkney.¹⁴ In the context of 19th century Scotland, Orkney was not that badly off, he suggested. Goldring’s analysis seems to contradict the picture presented in the Orkney parish accounts. Thus various studies indicate that there were many reasons why Orkneymen left the islands to find work and my thesis will illustrate that there were equally diverse reasons why they stayed in North America.

Goldring also looked at the “policy of dispersed recruitment” — or hiring from many different groups, such as other Scottish islands, as well as from the people born in Rupert’s Land. In his view, this policy served two purposes: it helped keep wages low and it stifled expressions of class-consciousness.¹⁵ HBC Governor George Simpson recommended a workforce with an equal proportion of Canadian-born servants and men from the Orkney islands to “keep up a spirit of competition and enable us to deal with them on such terms as may be considered necessary and proper.”¹⁶ By the middle of the century, Simpson extolled the benefits of a multi-racial work force. When the Orkney recruitment declined after the merger, hiring shifted to other Scottish islands such as Lewis and Zetland for a

¹³ Philip Goldring, *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1821-1900*, (Parks Canada: 1980), vol. 3, 3.

¹⁴ Goldring, 16.

¹⁵ Ibid, 14.

¹⁶ Ibid, 15.

while. But disappointment in this area prompted a return to Orkney hiring and Goldring noted that the preference for Orcadians “reflected mature judgment and observation of physical attributes and relevant previous experience.”¹⁷

Goldring’s work placed the Orkney workers in the context of changing labour relations in the fur trade, a significant factor in my study which will focus on these workers at a transitional period when the London Committee refocused its policies. Changes to recruitment practices were also studied by Carol Judd in her research on the HBC after the merger. At this time, a hierarchy of status emerged. In the new reality of the Company under Simpson’s strict management, Judd observed that natives didn’t fare well¹⁸ — they were usually hired seasonally, prized as guides and canoe builders, but the officer class was reserved mainly for the English and Highland Scots, and the servants were generally Orkneymen or French. This hierarchy became even more rigid after 1821, Judd noted, with Simpson calling the half-breeds “indolent and unsteady...fit only for voyaging”¹⁹ Thus racial stereotyping in the company became full blown. Judd also examined the move of the HBC towards hiring people from more diverse groups, especially after Simpson assumed control of the company in 1821; more variety in personnel brought social changes. As noted in Goldring’s studies,

¹⁷ Ibid, 27.

¹⁸ Carol Judd, “Native Labour and Social Stratification in the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Northern Department, 1770-1870,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, (1980), Vol. 17, No. 4, 305.

¹⁹ Carol Judd, “Mixt Bands of Many Nations: 1821-1870,” in *Old Trails and New Directions*, edited by Carol Judd and Arthur J. Ray (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1980), 131.

recruitment in the Orkney islands decreased for some time after the company merger, but rebounded in mid-century.

Edith Burley's study of the Hudson's Bay Company workforce from 1770 to 1879 emphasized the importance of the Company as a business enterprise first and foremost, and illustrated the role of the Orkneymen in that light; she looked at work relations and conflict in particular. For instance, she gave examples of Orkney clannishness and their banding together in "combinations" to demand better wages or improved conditions, especially when they were required to work inland, which was considered more dangerous than tasks at the posts. Burley stressed the influence of ethnicity as a factor in the behaviour of the servants, especially in instances of resistance.²⁰ The men from Orkney stuck together, but so did the Irish, the Norwegians and the Scottish Highlanders. Burley emphasized that Orcadians and others joined up not for adventure, but for a livelihood. Her account, which is thorough in its emphasis on economic factors as reasons why workers benefited in their employment with the Company, ignores the social and personal reasons why Orkneymen flourished in the Northwest.

But labour, recruitment patterns and status are only some of the ways in which historians have looked at the fur trade. Another aspect of social history in which the Orkney workers were an integral part was that of marriage and family life. Many European men formed alliances with aboriginal (and later, Métis and mixed-ancestry women) and fathered many children. Sylvia Van Kirk's study *Many Tender Ties* opened the door to the study of the contribution made by

²⁰ Edith Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 195.

women in the fur trade. Her book illustrated the diversity of roles women played as provisioners, partners and parents, the changing position of the native and mixed-ancestry wives and the rise in racial prejudice linked to the arrival of more white women into Rupert's Land. As well, Van Kirk examined the role of Indian women, within the tribes, who fostered trade with the Europeans.²¹ Her research pointed the way to the study of marriage and families and the social milieu that resulted. The alliances of the men from the Orkney islands with native women were part of this new society that evolved in the posts of the HBC and in the Red River area, but little attention has been focused on the Orkneymen as a class, in their role as husbands and fathers in the fur trade.

Jennifer Brown also studied fur-trade marriage and demographics,²² focusing on family size and fertility patterns, and showed how they varied greatly pre- and post-1821. Before 1800, sexual alliances were common and beneficial in advancing trade, but numbers were small and the posts widely scattered. After 1800, however, there was a rapid growth in the Métis and mixed-ancestry population caused by an increased number of HBC traders (from 181 in 1792 to 529 in 1799), as well as by the fact that it became more commonplace for traders, despite Company rules and other obstacles, to take native mates.²³ With the increased number of literate clerks in the trade, there was a better accounting of marital unions and births. Brown studied the changes in the fur trade social world

²¹ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980), 75.

²² Jennifer Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1980).

²³ Jennifer Brown, "A Demographic Transition in the Fur Trade Country: Family Sizes and Fertility of Company Officers and Country Wives," *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 6, No. 1 (1976), 68.

1821-50, when marriage was seen to have an effect on career prospects; marriage to a native or mixed-ancestry woman could be a liability. Upward mobility was identified as a social force after HBC Governor George Simpson married his young British cousin, Frances, in 1838. By the 1820s, Brown observed, the barriers between two worlds—i.e. the fur trade country and the civilized world—had broken down. There was more communication, better trade routes and changing values. The growing influence of the clergy also altered the attitudes of the social classes. Finally, Brown looked at the problems faced by subsequent generations — how fur trade officers sought to “place” their children for better prospects.²⁴ For educational purposes, many were sent to Red River but some parents preferred to send their children to England or to Ontario for schooling. Brown’s various articles illustrated the changing patterns of fur-trade marriages, the social consequences of mixed-ancestry alliances, and status. These alliances altered the dynamics of society in the West. Since many of these European men came from the Orkney islands, Brown and Van Kirk’s focus on marital and family ties, where these families settled, and how they fit into society at large, offer insight into the motivations of Orkneymen.

John Foster’s research went one step further, focusing on the process of metissage and the ethnogenesis of the Métis. Observing the “ebb and flow of European peoples in the fur trade”²⁵ he studied particular communities, such as

²⁴ Jennifer Brown, “Ultimate Respectability: Fur-Trade Children in the Civilized World,” *The Beaver* (Winter 1977), 48.

²⁵ John Foster, “The Origins of the Mixed Bloods in the Canadian West,” in *Essays on Western History*, edited by Lewis H. Thomas (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1976), 72.

Buffalo Lake, in present-day central Alberta, near the town of Bashaw. The development of Métis communities included a series of steps involving the outsider male wintering inland, his relationship with his native wife and her family, his relationship with his work mates,²⁶ and the desire to live apart from the natives and the trading post. Although he did not specifically highlight men from the Orkney islands, Foster's analysis provides a way of examining how and why some Orkneymen, who became freemen and married native women, could become part of new communities in the Northwest. Understanding this subset of Orkneymen—those who stayed in the Northwest and started native families—is the primary focus of this thesis.

The literature on the French Canadian voyageur provides some interesting parallels to the actions of Orkney servants. Carolyn Podruchny's *Making the Voyageur World* described the colourful French Canadian canoemen, with the purpose of looking beyond the stereotype so common in Canadian history books. Just as the men from the Orkney Islands were typified as sober, thrifty, tough men, so were the voyageurs caricatured as loud, bawdy, hard-drinking men. Podruchny looked at "their lives, world-views, values and unique situation as fur trade workers navigating the vast distances—physical, social and cultural—between their homelands and those of the aboriginal peoples who surrounded them in the continental interior."²⁷ Her book raises many questions about the fur trade social world that could be widely applied, even to the Orkneymen. Why did

²⁶ John Foster, "Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis," in *From Rupert's Land to Canada*, 179.

²⁷ Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 3.

they leave the St. Lawrence for work in the interior? How did their leaving impact the communities they left behind? Why did some return, and some become freemen, preferring to live in Indian territory? The answers Podruchny offered give a fresh look at the social world of the fur trade. Many left for economic reasons and because farming in Lower Canada was not easy; others, just like the Orkneymen, signed on for adventure. She wrote that most returned home after a contract or two with the fur trade companies, but offered no numbers on this; many obviously stayed in the interior. Some were homesick and hated the interior, some settled in Red River after their contracts expired. Others became freemen because they were unhappy with their superiors, or craved independence. These freemen “carved out a distinct social, economic and cultural space for themselves and their families and in doing so affected the larger forces in the fur trade.”²⁸ Podruchny’s study on the voyageurs points to new ways at examining the lives of Orkney fur trade workers, since the two ethnic groups were close work mates, particularly after the 1821 merger. How the Orkneymen differed from the French workers is an aspect of social history which has not been studied in detail.

Richard Glover’s introduction to the inland journals²⁹ of the late 18th century cited the important contribution of the Orkneymen, especially in comparison to the role of the voyageurs. The Orkney workers were far less picturesque, he wrote, but equally deserving of attention. Glover noted that, although the French-Canadian workers with the North West Company

²⁸ Podruchny, 301.

²⁹ Richard Glover, introduction to *Cumberland House Journals and Hudson House Journals 1775-1782*, Second Series (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1952), xxxvi-lvii.

outnumbered the Orkneymen by three to one, the latter group were the backbone of the HBC through the tough years of competition and, as such, were a significant part of the development of the West.

The foregoing historians highlight many aspects of the role of fur trade workers in useful and enlightening ways. They were part of a business empire; they were the pioneers of the Canadian West; they were the stuff of a new society, including the ethnogenesis of the Métis peoples. The Orkney workers were considered a stereotype in historical folklore. In most of the studies noted above, however, the role of the Orkneymen is a peripheral subject at best, with the exception of Nicks who studied the role of the Orkney workers from the point of view of their lives on the northern islands. Despite their overwhelming numbers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, they are described as only a small part of the fur trade, sometimes a mere footnote in coverage of the overall history and settlement. What is missing in the historiography is a focus on the Orkney workers themselves above and beyond their role as labourers. My thesis will address this gap and illustrate how their participation in the life of 19th century Rupert's Land was a significant contribution to life in the West.

The Orkney servants were unique in important ways. They were well suited to work in the climate and terrain of North America, and their familiarity with work on the sea and in boats in the cold Northern waters was a point in their favour. They have been stereotyped in many histories as thrifty, sturdy and sober. They were usually literate: Scotland, through an act of parliament in 1696, legislated universal education. Each parish was required to provide a school and

landowners were taxed to supply the necessary endowments. Thus the men from Orkney, as well as other parts of Scotland who signed on to work for the HBC could read or write, even if in a rudimentary fashion — a fact that may have provided opportunities for some. As well, there was diversity within the Orkney work force which has yet to be examined. The men who laboured for a contract or two then returned to the islands were likely different in significant ways to the men who chose to remain in North America. These differences need further study.

The purpose of my thesis is to provide a portrait of the Orkneymen in the Saskatchewan district—an inland post as opposed to the posts such as York Factory on the Bay, where the workers disembarked after the passage from Europe. In particular, I will examine what factors induced Orkneymen to remain in the Canadian West over the long term. Many of these long-service workers acquired skills that made them more valuable to the Company and helped in the adaptation process. Learning native languages, for instance, helped the fur trade workers become better traders with the aboriginal population. The men would live for long periods with the native bands and kinship ties were established. Many of these Orkneymen took native wives and this family life was an important bond that tied the men to the land. Others were masters at inland posts, an occupation that required authority and the ability to survive for long periods in remote regions where violence and physical dangers were a threat. My study will also look at how the men provided for their families — drawing their sons into the fur trade business, for instance.

The focus of my study is the period 1795 to about 1830: this encompasses the time when Edmonton House was first established, to a decade after the HBC and the North West Company (NWC) merger occurred. This cutoff point is chosen because it encompasses the sharp differences in recruitment of Orkneymen from the peak years of 1800, when up to 80 per cent of the workforce hailed from the Orkneys, to a decline after the merger of the two companies. My study will focus particularly on the men who decided to remain in the Northwest; of these, many retired to Red River as colonists or freemen while some stayed as freemen in other regions of the West. A few died on the job, of disease, accidents or misadventure. I will attempt to understand the motivations of these men as workers, family men and new settlers. Some were well adapted to life in the West, becoming highly skilled at various trades, such as building canoes or trading with the Indians, and so on, while a few rose to prominence.

My research methodology encompasses two approaches: first, I undertake a demographic profile of the men in the Saskatchewan district, highlighting their numbers as compared to men from other areas, and particularly the contrast with Canadian-born workers after the merger; how long they served with the Company, the jobs they performed and their usefulness, their prospects and problems, according to their superiors. This data, as well as the information gleaned from servants' lists and account books, will help to construct a picture of these men in a particular place and a particular time. Second, I will present several case studies to look at Orkney families over a longer period. Post journals,

genealogical sources and Métis scrip documents will flesh out the lives, family histories and work patterns of the men who stayed in Rupert's Land.

The Hudson's Bay post journals, servant's lists and account books provide numbers as to who was employed and for how long. The journals list day-to-day occurrences in which there are many references to the Orkneymen, both as a group and as individuals. Notes on climate, the dangers of fur trade life, daily tasks at the posts, violence with both Indian groups and rival traders, conflicts among the men and disciplinary actions against disobedient servants furnish a fuller portrait of the everyday work lives of the Orkney workers. The journals, as well as the servants lists, provide character sketches of the men — this man was an able obedient servant, that one was of little use, this one had skills at dealing with Indians, that one was getting old and feeble, and so on. This data indicates which Orkney workers were successful in the fur trade and which were “drudges” as well as which ones decided to retire in Rupert's Land. Statistics on the expiry dates of contracts, wages, debts are also included. In some cases, wills are documented, providing information on what monies and goods the men left to their families. Many of these documents are incomplete. Other information on individual Orkneymen can be found in such studies as Gail Morin's six-volume work on Métis families, in which birth dates, marriages, the birth of children down through several generations are documented.³⁰ Scrip records from the Government of Canada provide details of monetary transactions as well as data on

³⁰ Gail Morin, *Métis Families: A Genealogical Compendium* (Pawtucket, R.I.: Quintin Publications, 2001), vol. 1-6.

family settlement; these are useful in looking at what happened to the descendants of the first Orkney workers.

Historians, so far, have examined the Orkney workers in the context of the fur trade labour and, to a lesser extent, as a part of the social world of the fur trade but their role as a separate entity has not yet been examined. In particular, the decisions of a significant number of Orkneymen to stay in the Northwest have gone unstudied. My thesis will focus on these workers — their motivations, skills, adaptability — as a way to understand their decision-making and their contributions to the emerging social world of the fur trade in the mid 19th century.

CHAPTER 2

The Orkneymen in the Saskatchewan District: A Demographic profile

Beginning in the 1770s, the HBC abandoned their “sleep by the frozen sea” and began to establish inland posts to compete more effectively with the NWC. By 1795, they had established their first Edmonton House on the upper reaches of the Saskatchewan River and were trading for furs and provisions in what came to be known as the Saskatchewan district. In this chapter, I examine those Orkneymen that were sent inland to posts in the Saskatchewan district. Despite a historiography that notes most Orkneymen returned home after short service, my research indicates that up to 25 per cent of the total number of Orkneymen working in the Saskatchewan district between 1795 and 1830 worked for more than 20 years in Rupert’s Land.

In order to analyze the role and importance of the Orkney workers, it is necessary to define the parameters of the area studied and the group of men under consideration. The area of focus has been limited to the Saskatchewan district and the men who worked in the HBC trading system. Using Fort Edmonton³¹ records including fur trade journals, servants lists, accounts books as well as genealogical and census data I have constructed a demographic profile of this specific labour group. In all, I have been able to compile a list of about 160 men (See Appendix)

³¹ Fort Edmonton, located at several different sites on the North Saskatchewan River between 1795 and 1830, was one of the largest and most important posts both before and after the 1821 merger. It was an administrative, trade, warehouse and storage facility, a provision post and locale where York boats were produced to transport furs. Its fifth and final site was on the river terrace where the legislative grounds are located today.

originating in the Orkney Islands who worked in this district from 1795 to approximately 1830. Not all worked continually in the same district; however, all of the men on the list worked at least one contract term in the area under study. The number is not precise,³² but the data provides sufficient information to develop a portrait of these men — their occupations, their strengths and weaknesses and occasional transgressions as reported by their superiors, how long they stayed in the service of the Company, and how many eventually returned to the Orkney islands compared to how many remained in the Northwest. This latter group of men and their families will be the basis for the analysis in the succeeding chapters. Family ties were a strong bond for these men and one of the reasons why many remained in North America.

The dominance of the Orkneyman in the workforce of the HBC in this period is an established fact. When William Tomison, himself an Orkney native who worked his way up from labourer to inland master over a 40-year career, built Fort Edmonton in 1795, all of the 17 men with him were from the Orkney Islands. Of the 132 men listed as being sent inland from York Factory in the winter of 1795-96, 119 were from Orkney, one from Scotland, 9 from England and three were native-born of Rupert's Land.³³ Statistics compiled by Michael Payne in his study of the York Factory and Churchill posts confirm this

³² Various spellings of surnames made it difficult to be exact. For instance, Morwick was sometimes listed as Morrowick, Garrick as Garrioch, Sandison as Sanderson, and so on. Also there were at least a dozen Fletts (or Flet), sometimes with the same first name; some were noted as "William Senior" or Junior. There were at least four Orkneymen named William Sinclair dispatched from York Factory during the winter of 1795-96.

³³ Alice M. Johnson (ed.), *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence, 1795-1802* (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1967), xxxii.

dominance: in fact, he describes both posts as “in effect, expatriate Orkney communities.”³⁴ In his compilation of permanent employees with the HBC between the last decade of the 18th century and 1870, Payne noted that about half, at both posts, were Orkneymen.³⁵ After the 1821 merger, the percentages of Orkney workers declined, as the policy of dispersed recruitment began and the HBC absorbed the very considerable Canadian workforce of the Northwest Company.³⁶ Never again would this dominance be repeated (see Table 2.1).

TABLE 2.1
HBC SERVANTS SASKATCHEWAN DISTRICT BY ORIGIN

	1810-11		1815		1822-23		1828-29	
	No.	% of total	No	%of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total
ORKNEY	47	71	56	54	16	15	3	5
NATIVE-BORN/half-breed	11 (6)*	17	16 (9)	14	9	8	9 (1)	12
CANADA	1	2	2	2	45	42	45	70
SCOTLAND	0		20	20	15	14	3	5
ENGLAND	5	7	5	5	5	4	2	4
OTHER, UNKNOWN **	2	3	5	5	18	17	2	4
TOTAL	66	100	104	100	108	100	65	100

Sources:

HBCA, Fort Edmonton Account Books B. 60/d/2a, B.60/f/1, B. 60/d/12, B.60/d/27

* refers to native-born with a probable Orkney connection

** designated as Iroquois, Ireland and unknown.

The era of the Orkney servant in these years provides an opportunity to flesh out the identity of this unique group. With the burgeoning of fur trade posts in the

³⁴ Michael Payne, *A Social History of York Factory and Churchill* (PhD Dissertation, Carleton University, 1989), vol. 1, 101.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 103-104.

³⁶ After the 1821 merger, there were far fewer Orkney workers. The command of Fort Edmonton was taken over by John Rowand, a former NWC official from Montreal who favoured Canadian workers.

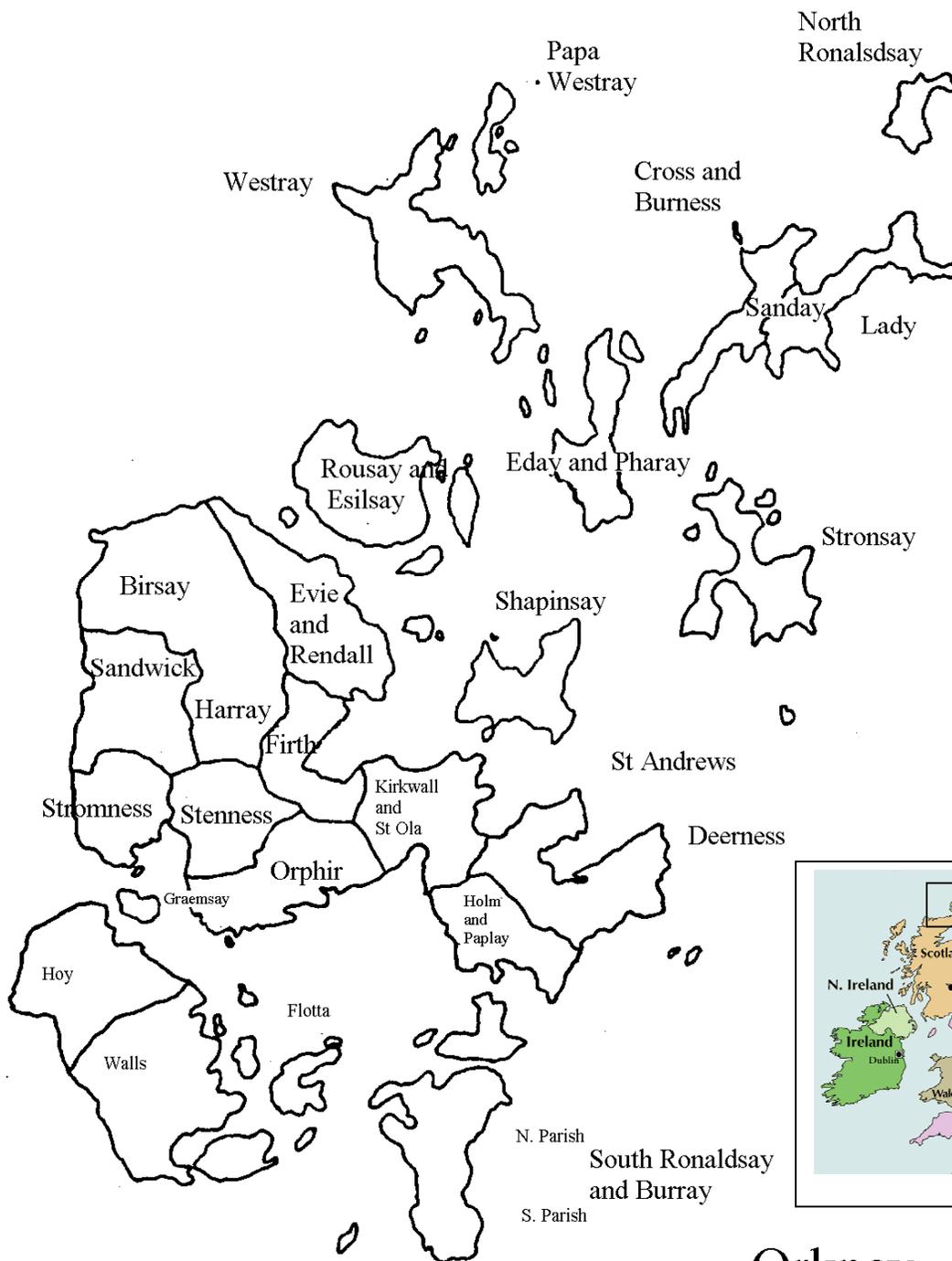
region after 1800, and the heightened violence and competition between the two companies leading up to the amalgamation, it was a particularly interesting historical time. As well, this peak period of Orkney recruitment includes data on specific Orkney parishes of origin, listed beside the name of each servant (see Map 1).³⁷ Increasingly after 1821, men were listed as simply being from Orkney, with no parish given. A few years later, this Orkney designation was sometimes dropped in favour of the more encompassing “Scotland”; even in the records at Red River, the retired fur traders were often counted simply as “Scotch settlers.” References in later fur trade journals mistakenly refer to Orkneymen as “Highlanders”,³⁸ and even as English to differentiate them from the French-speaking servants. Thus the Orkney identity eventually merged into the general Scottish and British background. But in the early 19th century at Edmonton and the Saskatchewan District, the Orkneyman remained a unique character, and his origins were a point of importance.

Every June, from the early 18th century onward, the Hudson’s Bay Company ships stopped at the Orkney Islands to load up on supplies and recruit men for its fur trade posts in the ‘Nor West.’ The Company had been signing up Orkney workers since 1707 and was happy with the men described as “more

³⁷ From the list of 160 men, more than half or 90 listed a parish on Mainland, the most populous island on which the port Stromness is situated. Probably, these parishes (Orphir, Stenness, Kirkwall, St. Ola, Sandwick, Firth, Harray, Birsay, Evie, Stromness and St. Andrews) were within easy distance of the port, thus making recruitment more accessible. After Mainland, the next most popular locale for recruits was South Ronaldsay/Burray, with 30 men listed. The fact that HBC chief William Tomison came from this parish, and that he donated money for a school there, may have encouraged residents to sign on with the HBC.

³⁸ HBCA, B.60/e/2 fo. 20, Fort Edmonton District Report 1816.

**MAP 1
ORKNEY ISLANDS WITH PARISHES**



Orkney

Source: <http://www.jenks.demon.co.uk/orkpar2.gif>

the English or the Irish.”³⁹ A carnival-like atmosphere pervaded the port town of Stromness as the ship with the flag of the red cross and four beavers approached. A Stromness businessman, David Geddes, had been established as a year-round recruiting agent in 1791 and he usually engaged about 60 to 100 men each year.⁴⁰ The number varied due to the needs of the Company, economic conditions on the islands, and the pressures of wartime service which absorbed some young men into the Navy. But the HBC was so happy with its Orkney contingent that nearly 80 per cent of its workforce in 1800 originated in these northern islands.⁴¹

Recruitment completed, the ships then set sail across the North Atlantic and stopped at York Factory, on the west shoreline of Hudson Bay. Some of the new workers stayed at the post while others were dispatched inland. The men from the Orkney islands may have been used to working on the sea and in cold weather, and proved adaptable in the employ of the HBC, but the geographic differences were immense: the few windswept islands north of Scotland, with a total area of less than 500 square miles, could hardly compare with the trackless miles of forest, lakes and rivers in Rupert’s Land. The Saskatchewan District was a vast area covering much of the present-day prairie provinces, extending as far west as the Rocky Mountains. In the Edmonton House fur trade journals of 1795-1802, the Saskatchewan district is defined as the region from which furs from Cumberland House and the posts beyond, as far as the Rockies, were brought to

³⁹ J. Storer Clouston, “Orkney and the Hudson’s Bay Company,” *The Beaver*, (December 1936), 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 41.

⁴¹ John Nicks, “Orkneymen in the HBC 1780-1821” *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 102.

York Factory on the Bay.⁴² For the purpose of this study, however, I will refer mainly to the boundaries assigned under the administration of George Simpson after the merger of the rival companies (see Maps 2 and 3). The area was reduced in size but still vast: from the Rockies on the west, it extended north of Lesser Slave Lake; to the east, just south of Ile a la Crosse encompassing Fort a la Corne where the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers split, and south below Chesterfield House, built in 1800 at the junction of the South Saskatchewan and Red Deer Rivers, near present-day Empress, Alberta. The men were not confined to one area and criss-crossed the district in their travels. For many of these men, this region became home.

Stories of hardship, courage, adventure and skill emerge as one studies this list of men. Apart from their common origin, there is considerable diversity in time served and tasks performed. There was Gilbert Laughton who “had no equal for ingenuity”⁴³ and was considered one of the best canoe builders and blacksmiths; he returned to Orkney after 19 years service. William Flett lived nearly his entire adult life in the Northwest, as labourer and boatman, then as master at numerous posts, and was also a top-notch canoe builder.⁴⁴ He had a country marriage with a Cree woman named Saskatchewan and fathered four children; his daughter Elizabeth married another Orkneyman from Edmonton

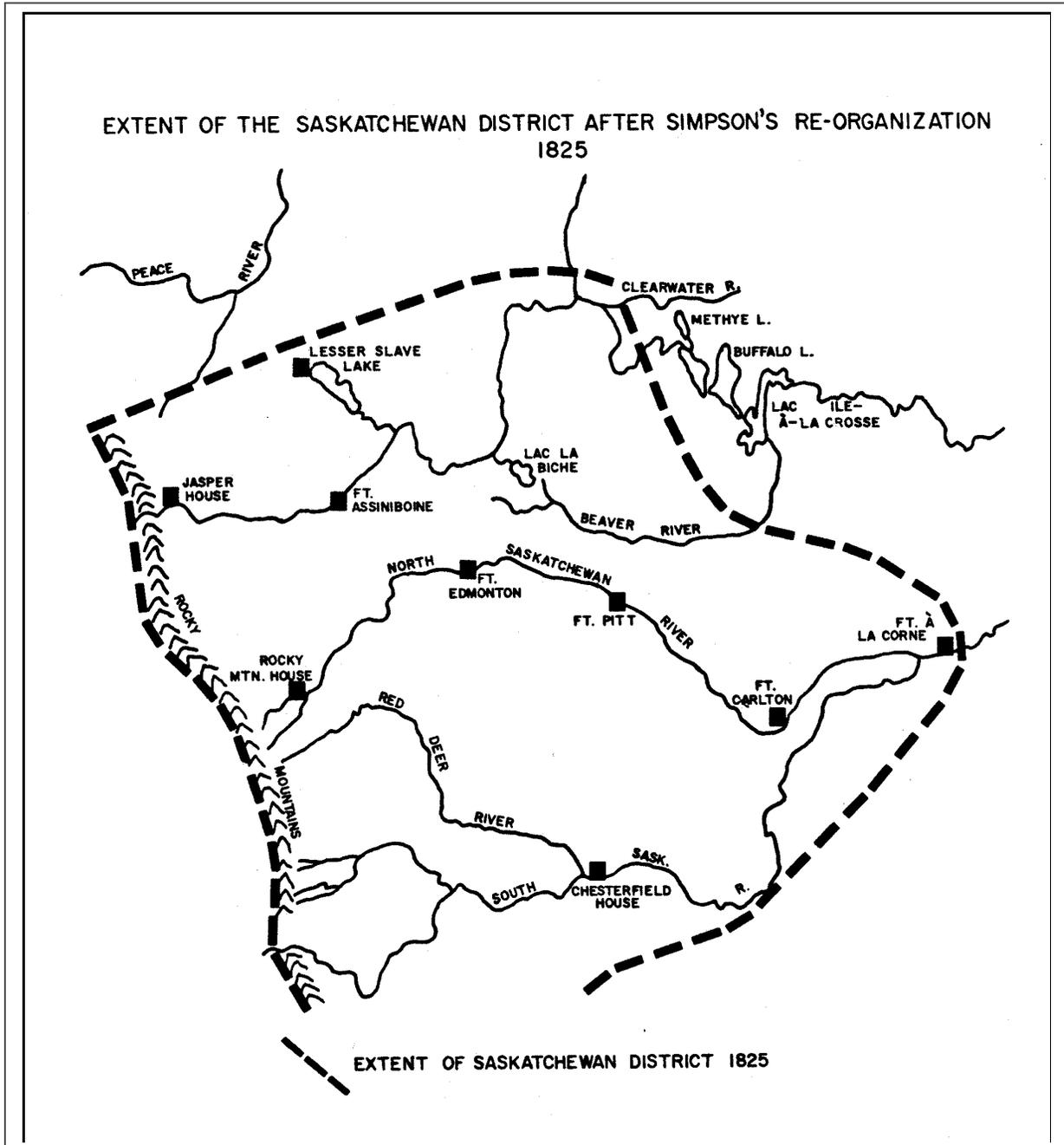
⁴² *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence 1795-1802* (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1967) xciv.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13n.

⁴⁴ HBCA, B.60 a/10, fo.1d Fort Edmonton Post Journal, 23 Sept. 1811.

MAP 2

Saskatchewan district 1825



Source: Gerhard J Ens and Barry Potyondi, *A History of the Upper Athabasca Valley in the Nineteenth Century* (Ottawa: Parks Canada Microfiche Report #225, 1986), 267.

House, Robert Rowland.⁴⁵ John Park, who held almost every job a HBC servant could have, from steersman to cooper to assistant trader, accompanied Joseph Howse's expedition across the Rocky Mountains in 1810.⁴⁶ Another was Alexander Flett, a respected trader with the Indians as well as a good chimney maker who was so well regarded by inland officers that he was lured away to a better job and better pay by the NWC in 1802.⁴⁷

There were instances of discord, dissent and danger as well. Benjamin Bruce was fined for refusing to go inland,⁴⁸ holding out to get a better offer from the NWC, but still remained a valued employee with the HBC until his death at Il a la Crosse. Magnus Muer was promptly dispatched back to Orkney on the HBC ship *King George* as "useless" after he refused orders to go inland;⁴⁹ James Hay also went home after he displeased Tomison and his contract was not renewed.⁵⁰ Accidents and illnesses occurred regularly. John Corrigan drowned in a small lake in 1813 after trying to retrieve a wounded swan;⁵¹ Thomas Isbaster died in his bed at Carleton House of an abscess in 1797.⁵² Others worked more anonymously and left few marks in fur trade history except their names on an account book, returning to the islands to be re-absorbed into the traditional society there.

⁴⁵ Gail Morin *Metis Families: A Geneological Compendium* (Pawtucket, R.I.: Quintin Publications, 2001), vol. 5, 69.

⁴⁶ HBCA John Park Biographical Sheets

¹⁷ *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence, 1795-1802*, xcii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 204.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 136.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 296.

⁵¹ HBCA, B. 60a./12 fo.1, Fort Edmonton Post Journal, 8 Aug. 1813.

⁵² *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence*, 131.

The men usually signed for contracts of three to five years. It took at least that long for the men to become proficient on the boats. As James Bird wrote in his Fort Edmonton district report in 1816: “The contracts of servants engaged for only three years expire before the men have sufficient practice to enable them to conduct Boats with safety.”⁵³ Men with experience were highly valued and encouraged to stay longer than a two- or three-year period. For those not earning more than £25 per year, an extra 12 guineas was offered if they re-engaged for five years.⁵⁴ A smaller incentive was given for those who preferred a shorter contract. But incentive or not, working for the HBC suited many of the men. Out of the 162 Orkneymen identified in the Saskatchewan District between 1795 and 1830, I identified at least 38 who stayed more than 20 years, 20 who stayed between five and 10 years, 11 who remained up to 10 years while the remainder, or 93 men, lacked data as to what happened to them after their terms expired or worked five years, or less. It is certain that some of the workers in this last group worked more than five years, so the overall number of long-term workers is probably on the low side (see Table 2.2). Whereas the research of John Nicks and Philip Goldring indicated that the Orkney islands were a good place for the men to return to after a few years in the ‘Nor’Wast’, these statistics show that nearly a quarter of this group stayed more than 20 years.

⁵³ HBCA, B.60/e/2 Fort Edmonton District Report, 1816

⁵⁴ HBCA, B .60/a/8, fo. 6d, Fort Edmonton Post Journal 22 Nov. 1808.

TABLE 2.2
YEARS OF SERVICE AMONG ORKNEYMEN, 1795 to 1830
Saskatchewan District

LENGTH OF STAY	NUMBER OF MEN	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
5 years or less, and unknown	93	57
5-10 years	11	8
10-20 years	20	12
More than 20 years	38	23
TOTALS	162	100%

Sources: Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence, 1795-1802 (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1967)
Edmonton Accounts and Servants Listing, 1810-1830, HBCA, B.60/a/1-27

Returning home, then, was not necessarily an attractive option for all of the workers. The numbers suggest a range of trajectories among the men and a diversity in the overall goals of the Orkney servants. In most descriptions of the fur trade workers, these men are portrayed as a single group, a stereotype: the sturdy, sober, thrifty, hardworking, slightly clannish, workingman. A sort of homogeneity has emerged, in the same way that the French Canadian voyageur is depicted as the colourful, volatile character paddling his canoe through the Canadian wilderness. John Nicks' research focused on a small sample from specific parishes in the Orkney islands, suggesting that men worked a contract or two, saving enough to come home.

This portrait of a sojourner Orkney workforce is one that is founded in tradition; the men would farm, then leave for fishing in Iceland and other distant islands. Goldring stressed that work with the HBC fit the cycle of the Orkneyman's work life: because of a tendency to late marriage (about 30 or so), men were able to work several years in the Northwest, save money and return to

the islands, then marry with the solid experience of the Company as a foundation for their future lives.⁵⁵ Likewise, Edith Burley noted that employment with the HBC fit into the traditional life cycle and in fact helped to preserve it.⁵⁶ In his history of the Orkney islands, Walter Thomson noted that the migratory cycle of staying home when there was work to be done, but going abroad when required, was a common practice in the islands dating back to the Viking era.⁵⁷

The history of the Orkneymen in the Saskatchewan district list suggests, however, a divergence from these themes, pointing to choices that had less to do with monetary concerns and more to do with adaptation to a new life in a new land. As I will explain in the next chapter, this “adaptation” referred to links in both work and personal relationships. The men’s successful mastery of skills in fur trade country made them useful to the Company but also brought them into long-term contact with the native peoples with whom the HBC traded. By learning the aboriginal languages and forming personal and familial ties with the Indians, the Orkneymen put down roots in their adopted homeland.

Once in Rupert’s Land, the men set to work at a variety of tasks. The majority were taken on as labourers or middleman, considered “the bottom rung” of the Company ladder, according to Philip Goldring’s analysis of labour practices.⁵⁸ The midman, as the name implies, was the central space in the boats

⁵⁵ Philip Goldring, *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1821-1900* (Parks Canada: 1980), vol. 3, 94.

⁵⁶ Edith Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company; Work, Discipline and Conflict in the Hudson’s Bay Company 1770-1870* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 71.

⁵⁷ W.P. Thomson, *History of Orkney* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1987), 207.

⁵⁸ Philip Goldring, vol. 2, 168.

which, unlike the steersman and bowsmen who had to guide the vessels, required muscle rather than skill. An inventory of recruits in 1798, when 63 men joined up in Stromness, reveals this hiring pattern.⁵⁹ Only one of these recruits, Alexander Kennedy from the parish of South Ronaldsay, (who did not serve in the Saskatchewan district) was listed as a “writer” or clerk and eventually became an officer. The rest consisted of 45 labourers, three smiths, six sailors, two steersmen and one each of bricklayer, craft master, tailor, shipwright, boat-builder and sawyer. In the list of 162 men of the Saskatchewan district, 60 were listed simply as labourer or midman; the men with no task attributed to them on the servants’ lists would likely be assigned to this labourer category as well. Another 63 were assigned to such tasks as steersman, bowsman, canoeman or boatman. Only nine were noted as particular tradesmen, such as coopers, smiths or carpenters, and two were listed as writers.

The “labourer” occupation included manual work of all kinds: cutting and hauling firewood, (needed all year round) clearing the yards, planting and tending the gardens, and making repairs around the fort. The everyday servant was also expected to partake in hunting, fishing, hauling meat, mending nets, building shacks to store the meat, cutting ice from the river to keep the meat fresh, and building sleds to haul furs and other goods. Others tended the horses. The tradesmen had their own specific chores: the smith made steels and awl blades and repaired guns and hatchets; the cooper made kegs, the tailor made clothing and the carpenter took part in boat building and wood cutting for various repairs.

⁵⁹ J. Storer Clouston, “Orkney and the Hudson’s Bay Company,” *The Beaver*, December 1936, 8.

Sunday was a day of rest. The occupations varied with the seasons. But as Goldring noted, versatility was expected of the men and they turned their hands to many tasks.⁶⁰ On a typical day, the various tasks performed by the men were listed in the fur trade journals. For instance, on Nov. 9, 1814, James Bird chronicled the work of the men at Edmonton House:

James Folster is tenting with three tents of Southward Indians to take care of what Skins they may kill as they are tenting in the Neighbourhood of several free Canadians; Peter Flett and John McIntrye are living with the Hunters to collect meat; Robert Rowland and Peter Corrigan are fishing at God's Lake, James Whiteway and George Spence are at the Summer Berry River waiting till they receive the fall hunts of a few Indians who are in the Quarter. Hugh Gibson is taking care of our Horses at a distance from the House to prevent their being stolen. John Moar is making a boat, Gilbert Budge making small pine kegs for the Indian trade. James Dickson is making occasional iron work for boat builders, Indian awls, steels and repairing hatchets, David Johnston with a horse hauling firewood, Angus McKay and John Forbister sawing wood for boats, James Ross, Murdoch Rossie, John Morowick, William Gibson cutting firewood and Mr. Wm Flett cooking.⁶¹

The above passage notes both the manual work at the posts as well as the tasks away from the post, involving trade and communication with the native groups that interacted with the men at the posts. Some of the men in Saskatchewan District displayed skills over and above those of labourer or boatmen, jobs that made them particularly useful to the Company. These were the workers who were singled out with comments such as: “respected by Indians”; “useful going out to meet Indians”; “good man to meet Indians” “good trader”; “beloved by natives” or “good runner.” They proved their usefulness as masters at the provision posts scattered in the vast district or moving about inland,

⁶⁰ Philip Goldring, *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1900*, vol. 2, 169.

⁶¹ HBCA, B 60/a/13 fo. 7d, Fort Edmonton Post Journal, 11 Nov. 1814.

interacting with NWC traders, before 1821, in addition to the native bands. A few, such as James Whiteway or James Gaddy, learned the native languages and embarked on journeys to investigate fur-trading possibilities in locations beyond the Saskatchewan district. They worked out trade arrangements with the various native groups and transported the furs back to the posts. Violence with native peoples or rival traders, and physical hardships were a fact of life for these men and tested their strength, will and adaptability in an often unforgiving landscape.

The age at which the men signed on was a clue to the Company's eagerness in keeping the workers for long periods. According to research on the workers cited by Goldring, the "ideal Company recruit" was over 18 but under 30, healthy, strong and temperate, frugal with his wages and unburdened with a wife at home, and therefore more likely to adapt well to the service and re-engage again and again.⁶² When the men signed on with the Company nearly all were in their early 20s; a few were 17 or 18. Birth dates are not exact (Orkney statistics show that many families did not register births in order to avoid the bureaucratic fee).⁶³ The men worked on through their twenties, thirties and forties; an occasional servant was still working into his fifties. Character remarks in the 1815 servants' lists noted that Hugh Howston was "getting rather weak, getting old, sickly, unfit for country" at age 51,⁶⁴ although James Sandison at age 58 and William Craigie at

⁶² Philip Goldring, "Scottish Recruiting for the Hudson's Bay Company 1821-1880" *Scottish Tradition*, Volume ix/x (1979-80), 94-95.

⁶³ J. Storer Clouston, ed., *Orkney Parishes, The Statistical Account of Orkney 1795-1798* (Kirkwall: W.R. Mackintosh, 1927), 114.

⁶⁴ HBCA, B.60/f/1. Fort Edmonton and District Employees 1815.

49 were still considered good servants. For the most part, though, these workers were men in the prime of their lives.

After the merger of the two companies, the profile of the Saskatchewan district changed profoundly. Under Simpson, the Company was reorganized and cut back: from 2,000 commissioned officers, clerks and wintering servants in 1821, to 767 six years later.⁶⁵ Where once the Orkneymen dominated, now the servants from the Northwest Company, mainly from the St. Lawrence area of Canada, became favoured, at least in the Saskatchewan District. (see Table 2.2). Now, names such as Dubois, Goulet and Charbonneau overwhelmed the Taites, Spences and Fletts. The personnel changes would have been noticed by John Rowand, the son of a Montreal surgeon and a onetime NWC partner who became a chief trader with the HBC after the coalition.⁶⁶ He was promoted to chief factor in 1826. Respected by the Indian groups who frequented Fort Edmonton, as well as by Governor Simpson, Rowand helped turn the Saskatchewan district into one of the most profitable regions for the HBC. Before Rowand, Edmonton was considered a “troublesome post”⁶⁷ but the new factor encouraged the Peigan to trade with Indians to the south; the workforce was reduced from 171 in 1821 to 50 in 1825-26. In a district report for 1824, Rowand described the servants at Fort Edmonton under his supervision as “all satisfactory,”⁶⁸ making no comments to

⁶⁵ Philip Goldring, “Scottish Recruiting,” 85.

⁶⁶ Sylvia Van Kirk, “John Rowand,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography online*

⁶⁷ *Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert’s Land, 1821-31* (Hudson’s Bay Record Society: 1940), xxxvi.

⁶⁸ HBCA District Report 1824.

differentiate the Canadian workers from the Orkneymen, though by this time Orkneymen were only a small proportion of the workforce at Edmonton House.

While John Nicks and Philip Goldring have outlined the reasons why most Orkney workers returned to their homeland, they say little of the reasons why many stayed. There were equally sound reasons for this choice. Those that did stay either went free⁶⁹ or retired to the Red River Settlement, or another part of the West. These men had ties that bound them more closely to Rupert's Land — wives and children. Alliances in the “custom of the country” were always part of the fur trader's life. I will not analyze the impact of the role of women and children here, nor the policies of the HBC and the NWC in regard to these alliances; studies by Sylvia Van Kirk⁷⁰ and Jennifer Brown⁷¹ have addressed the importance of fur trade marriages and family life in detail. My purpose is to demonstrate the demographic significance of wives and children in the Saskatchewan district, and to suggest how the alliances between Orkney servants and women influenced the decisions of some of these men to remain in the Canadian West.

Women and children are mentioned infrequently in the fur trade journals before the 1820s. There are fleeting references to the presence of family life such as: “James Folster accompanied by his wife set off of his return to White Hall, he takes with him a few articles of goods and letters from England from the men at

⁶⁹ “Going free” referred to workers who left the employ of the Company to work independently as hunter, trader or trapper.

⁷⁰ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980).

⁷¹ Jennifer Brown, *Strangers in Blood; Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1980).

that place....”⁷² Unofficial reports make references to the wives of the Company men. In Peter Fidler’s rough journal from 1796-97, references are made to the wives of two Orkney workers, Magnus Spence and James Gaddy: Fidler noted that Spence’s wife was paid for making parchment skins and tying up furs, while Gaddy’s mate was paid for interpreting services with the Stone Indians several times during that winter.⁷³ Officials in London, however, were well aware of the presence of women and children and the expenses they incurred. In 1802, responding to a question from the London Committee about the costs of maintaining families at the posts, a reply from the Northwest described the women as “deserving of some encouragement and indulgence” because of the tasks they performed: cleaning beaver skins, repairing lines for snow shoes and making leather shoes for men.”⁷⁴

Servants’ lists from 1822 noted a large increase in the number of servants with families. This might have been due to the influx of native-born and Canadian servants with larger families into the work force of the HBC, but was probably also indicative of a different reporting with Simpson wanting to make the case for a radical downsizing of the workforce. In an accounting of 87 workers, a total of 143 women and children were also included. Four of the 16 Orkney servants still listed as employees in the Saskatchewan District were noted as having their family members with them: William Flett had his family of three,

⁷² HBCA B. 60 a/15 Fort Edmonton House journal, 14 Nov. 1815.

⁷³ HBCA, B.49/a/27b. Quoted by Gabriella Prager, “Behavioral Implications of Transformation Processes: An Example of Fur Trade Archeology” (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1980).

⁷⁴ *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence 1795-1802*, cix, c.

Hugh Gibson had 7, John Moar had 4, Robert Rowland had 3.⁷⁵ As well, one Scotsman and English chief trader John Peter Pruden also had families. All of the remaining family members belonged to the workers who had formerly worked with the NWC, or employees who had been born in Rupert's Land. Goldring speculated that between a quarter and one-third of all company employees at any one time had mates and dependents living with them at their post after 1821.⁷⁶ Accordingly, the Fort Edmonton journals began to refer more frequently to the presence of women and children in the forts. Their contribution was noted mainly in the work they carried out; they tended the gardens, cut hay, did leather work. In 1825, the journals recorded the presence of 19 women and 41 children at the posts, and mentioned other dependants, including the elderly and blind people there as well.⁷⁷ Fort Edmonton Factor John Rowand made a note of this family life in the Saskatchewan District, in discussing the changes brought about by the coalition. He wrote in his 1824-25 report:

...few districts belonging to the Northern Department has undergone such a change as this has done, since the coalition; there has been at that time no less than 171 Officers and men attached to it, who were encumbered with very large families amounting exclusively to from three to 400 souls. Last year (1824) the complement was reduced to 80 officers and men with families consisting of 18 women and 32 children which was then supposed to be the lowest standard on which the trade could be conducted with safety.⁷⁸

In the Saskatchewan District, the list of 162 men included about 30 men who retired as colonist or freeman, usually to the Red River Settlement, with wives

⁷⁵ HBCA, B. 60/d/12 Fort Edmonton and District Employees 1822-23.

⁷⁶ Michael Payne, *A Social History of York Factory and Churchill*, vol. 1, 37.

⁷⁷ HBCA B. 60/a/23 Edmonton House Post Journal 1825-26.

⁷⁸ HBCA B. 60/e/8 Fort Edmonton District Report 1824-25.

and families. The data indicates that most of these men had marriages in the “custom of the country” before they moved to Red River, after which the unions were sanctioned and recorded in the church registers. Michael Payne suggested that the Orkney workers who enjoyed working in the Northwest for long periods were a valuable part of company operations “and their right to marry and raise families was less easy to deny than in the case of temporary sojourners.”⁷⁹

Orkneymen and their families retired to Red River in significant numbers. With the cutbacks in the number of posts and a push for economy after the merger, Company officials facilitated the need for servants and their families to be relocated. Council minutes in August 1821 ordered that “Mr. Sutherland be directed to give all convenient assistance in the conveyance of the families of the Servants in the Saskatchewan, whose engagements expire next summer, or what may be otherwise disposed to quite the service, to Red River or any other place they may wish to retire to.”⁸⁰ Census records from Red River Settlement of 1827 cited 236 heads of households, 44 of which were noted as being from Orkney.⁸¹ This number may be low, since, as mentioned earlier, many records used “Scotland” as a place of origin, rather than the more specific Orkney islands.

With the alliances of Orkneymen with aboriginal and mixed-ancestry women, a new generation of fur trade workers emerged, and many of these sons, born in Rupert’s Land, joined the Company. While the parentage is not always

⁷⁹ Michael Payne, *A Social History of York Factory and Churchill*, vol. 1, 34.

⁸⁰ *Minutes of Council, Northern Department of Rupert Land 1821-1831* (London; the Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1940), 3.

⁸¹ <http://www.google.ca/Government of Manitoba archives, Red River Métis Settlement census 1827>.

available in the data used for this study, several can be linked to an Orkney connection. Between 1809 and 1830, a total of 27 servants are listed in Saskatchewan District records as born in Rupert's Land or Hudson's Bay. Nearly half have surnames common among Orkney workers: Flett, Spence, Whitford and Sandison. A few can be definitely traced in HBC records to an Orkney-born father while some of the fathers are listed as being from Scotland, which may encompass the Orkney islands. George Spence, for instance, listed in the 1809 account books, was the son of Orkneyman James Spence and his native wife Nestichio; his brother James also served with the Company.⁸² Peter Whitford, a boatman at Fort Carleton in 1815, married the daughter of long-serving Orkneyman Magnus Spence.⁸³ These kinds of connections illustrate not only the family life of the Orkneymen in the Northwest, but show Orkneymen acting as concerned fathers securing employment and careers for their sons in HBC service. This kind of generational continuity would certainly be a factor in persuading Orkneymen to stay in the Northwest.⁸⁴

The Orkney servants who lived and worked in the vast Saskatchewan district were not a homogenous group, as the preceding data has shown. They performed various tasks and worked with different expectations. Most signed on

⁸² HBCA, James Spence Biographical sheets

⁸³ HBCA, Magnus Spence Biographical sheets

⁸⁴ Two studies highlight the role of native sons in the Northwest. See the study by Denise Fuchs, *Native Sons of Rupert's Land, 1760 to the 1860s* (PhD dissertation, University of Manitoba, May 2000). Fuchs singled out 95 men who were the offspring of European fathers (some from Orkney) and aboriginal or mixed-race women between 1760 and the 1860s. Also, see work by Alvina Block, *George Flett, Native Presbyterian Missionary: "Old Philosopher" / "Rev.d Gentleman"* (MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1997). Flett was the bicultural son of Orkneyman George Flett (included in my thesis) and Peggy Whitford.

under the generic title of labourer but proved their versatility with other tasks that made them valuable to the Company. The stereotype of the sturdy boatman who saved all his money to return home is challenged by the statistics. A significant proportion, up to 25 per cent, adapted to life in Rupert's Land and decided to remain. A major division is evident between the men who returned to the Orkney islands, and those who stayed. The tasks they performed, their adaptability to the life in North America and their family ties are crucial factors to be investigated.

CHAPTER 3

Saskatchewan District Orkneymen and long-term service in the HBC

Although Orkneymen were heavily recruited for work in the fur trade in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, many officials looked down on the men from the northern Scottish islands as slow, obstinate drudges. They were considered useful as boatmen and at tasks requiring physical strength and endurance, as evidenced by their sheer numbers at the Bay-side posts, but except for a few notable exceptions such as William Tomison, who rose from labourer to chief factor, most worked in relative obscurity. Colin Robertson, a NWC official who was later in charge at Edmonton House prior to John Rowand's appointment, argued for the employment of Canadians during the time when traders were making a push to expand in the Athabasca region; he said the Canadians were "admirable voyagers" as opposed to the Orkneymen who were "only competent for the Bayside posts" and already thinking about retirement back home by the time they had learned to handle a canoe.⁸⁵ Likewise, Governor George Simpson criticized Orkneymen for their "slow inanimate habits." In a letter to the London Committee in 1822, shortly after he took the helm in the newly amalgamated Company, Simpson noted that the Orkney workers were not suited for inland work because it took them too long to get used to navigation whereas the

⁸⁵ E.E. Rich (ed.), *Colin Robertson's Correspondence Book 1817-1822* (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1939), xxvii.

Canadians, with proper management, were “active and indefatigable.”⁸⁶ Other reports noted the Orcadians’ clannishness and their tendency to enter into “combinations” to demand more money for inland service.⁸⁷

My study of Orkney servants with the HBC in the Saskatchewan district, however, contradicts these judgments. Many of the men excelled at their work in the Northwest, belying the stereotype of the slow, strong drudge. The long-service workers proved their mettle in various ways. Coming from the cold northern islands where livelihoods derived from the sea were commonplace, they were suited to work in the climate and environment of Rupert’s Land. Venturing far inland to the posts that were scattered in the vast region of the Saskatchewan district, they gained skills that differed from the work at the Bay-side posts in significant ways — skills that brought them in contact for long periods with the native groups, thus increasing their usefulness to the Company. The men learned to cope and survive in the wilderness of the Saskatchewan district, where physical hardship and potential violence were ever-present realities. They travelled great distances to live at the far-flung wintering posts and some spent winters living with the Indian bands. Many learned the native tongues—Cree, Assiniboine, Chipewyan and Blackfoot—in an attempt to negotiate trade deals. Predictably, alliances between the men and the native bands developed. Many of the workers married in the custom of the country and raised families.

⁸⁶ R. Harvey Fleming (ed.), *Minutes of Council, Northern Department of Rupert’s Land 1821-31* (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1940), 349.

⁸⁷ E.E. Rich (ed.), *Cumberland House Journals and Inland Journal, 1775-82, First Series 1775-79* (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1951), 142.

Far from being mere drudges doing nothing but manual work, they were versatile, capable and skilled inland servants. They adapted to their new country and in doing so, many elected to remain in the Northwest rather than return to the Orkney islands. In this chapter I will examine the process of adaptation and how many of the Orkney servants flourished in their new environment. My analysis has two parts: first, I will focus on the various tasks these long-service Orkneymen performed — trading, learning the native languages, as well as carrying out physically demanding and dangerous jobs, as a way to measure their adaptability. Next, I will look at the family ties these men established and how wives and children were a significant factor of their adaptation to the new land and their decision not to return to Scotland.

The types of work the men performed can be seen as a defining factor between the men who returned home after a relatively brief sojourn in Rupert's Land and the ones who adapted. A list of occupations shows that most signed on labourers, the generic designation for any worker; as we have seen they turned their hands to many tasks (see Table 3.1). The statistics show that nearly 80 per cent were noted as labourer, midmen, steersmen or boatmen and about half of this number were simply labourer or midmen, the designations of the least specialized skill, whereas steersmen needed to have more knowledge in the boats. Less than 15 per cent, or 26 of the 162 men, were described as carrying out more varied tasks. These were the men who were useful not only in the boats and as labourers, but in tasks outside the posts that required communication with Indians as well as rival traders. In the Saskatchewan district, company officials tended to look down

on the “drudges” at the posts, as the district reports showed: John Foubister was described as a “very indifferent steersman, and if possible a still worse walker, the only thing he is fit for is doing drudgery work about a Fort.”⁸⁸ Nevertheless he worked with the Company for 20 years in various menial jobs, returning to Europe in 1826. Thomas Loutit was listed as an “indifferent voyageur, and a still worse runner to Indians, but makes a very good drudge about a House.”⁸⁹ The work of the labourer was essential to the maintenance of the posts, but it was the skills that took the men out of the post that advanced the success of the fur trade, and gave the workers the opportunities to learn new things.

Table 3.1
Breakdown of tasks among Orkney servants
In the Saskatchewan District, 1795-1830

	Number of servants	Percentage of total
Labourer/midman	55	34
Tradesmen (cooper, blacksmith, carpenter, sawyer)	9	6
Steersmen, boatmen	70	43
Linguists, interpreter, trader, masters at posts	26	16
Writers	2	1
TOTALS	162	100

Sources: HBCA, Servants lists and Account books, B.60/d/2a, 60/f/1, 60/d/12, 60/d/19; 60/d/27. Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence 1795-1802, (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1967).

⁸⁸ HBCA, B.60/e/3. Fort Edmonton District Report, 1818-19.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Some of the long-service workers, including Gilbert Laughton and James Gaddy senior, although praised for their work, still chose to return to the Orkney islands. Doubtless they had saved money and looked forward to retirement back home. But returning home was not the only option for HBC servants. I have been able to reconstruct the employment history of 18 Orkneymen who chose to retire in Rupert's Land (see Table 3.2). This list consists of men who stayed in the Northwest and performed tasks beyond that of labourer, work that took them deep into Indian country; usually the jobs consisted of learning native languages. As well, all of these 18 men had wives and children. By examining the work trajectories of these particular servants and their choices to establish families, it is possible to explore the idea of adaptation as the crucial variable in determining which Orkneymen stayed rather than returning to the Orkney islands.

These 18 were not the only long-service workers in the Saskatchewan district; as the previous chapter noted, at least 25 per cent of the 162 Orkneymen working between 1795 and 1830 stayed more than 20 years, the equivalent of at least three contracts with the Company, and an additional 10 per cent stayed between 10 and 20 years. This longevity suggests adaptability to the country as well, even if these workers made the decision to return to Scotland. My list focuses on the particular subset who not only excelled at difficult and challenging jobs inland and stayed more than 20 years, but are known to have established family ties in the process.

Table 3.2
Tasks of long-service workers who stayed and married

	TASKS/OCCUPATIONS	WORK HISTORY
James Sandison	Steersman, trader, canoe builder in charge at Carleton House	1795-1816, retired 1816 in Rupert's Land
James Gaddy Jr.	Canoeman, assistant trader	32 years service, retired to RRS in 1823, drowned 1833
Oman Norquay	Canoeman	28 years service, retired to RRS in 1819, died 1820
William Flett	Canoe builder, occasional master	41 years service, retired to RRS in 1823
Magnus Spence	Linguist, steersman	39 years service, retired to RRS
Benjamin Bruce	Steersman, assistant trader, interpreter	27 years service, died at Ile a la Crosse 1823
John Park	Steersman, occasional master	30 years service, retired to RRS in 1822
George Flett	Outpost master, boatman, clerk	27 years service, retired to RRS 1822
James Folster	Canoeman, runner	28 years, free to RRS 1823
William Dunnett	Canoeman, runner	27 years service, retired RRS 1823
Peter Corrigan	Canoeman, fisherman	27 years service, retired to RRS 1824
Hugh Gibson	Runner, interpreter	26 years service, free to RRS 1823
Andrew Setter	Steersman	23 years service, retired to RRS 1823
Robert Rowland	Steersman	22 years service, retired RRS 1823
Thomas Firth	Steersman and guide	19 years service, free to RRS 1834
William Taylor	Assistant trader	18 years service, retired to RRS 1822
James Whiteway	Interpreter, linguist, trader	24 years service, retired to RRS 1822
Robert Wilson	Boatbuilder, postmaster, clerk	35+ service, died at Oxford House 1864

Sources: HBCA, Servants lists and account books, B.60/d/2a, 60/f/1, 60/d/12, 60/d/19; 60/d/27. Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence 1795-1802 (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1967).

Descriptions of the jobs these servants performed are revealed in a variety of sources: in the brief description in the servants' lists, in the "character comments" and also in the post journals, which indicate more fully the day-to-day, month-by-month accomplishments of these servants. Comparing the role of the servants at the bayside posts with the work inland is instructive in understanding what challenges the Orkneymen faced. In his study of the social world of the Churchill and York Factory posts, Michael Payne noted that the work was "primarily manual"⁹⁰ relying on human muscle and simple tools, usually involving extensive wood-cutting and hauling. But working inland was a necessity for the HBC if it wanted to compete successfully with the North West Company. From the mid-1700s onward, the HBC recognized the importance of gaining inland experience in order to compete with the NWC. William Tomison, the powerful HBC official for nearly half a century, embarked on voyages of exploration beginning in 1767.⁹¹ His influence and experience benefited the prospects of the Orkney workers who followed him to the New World. Throughout his career as inland master and first factor at Edmonton House, he was able to "transform an inexperienced body of Orcadian workmen into a cadre of skilled canoemen and winterers with a strong esprit de corps and with new forms of social organization and discipline which were less rigid and more egalitarian than those at posts on Hudson Bay."⁹² The leadership abilities of such Orkneymen as Tomison, however

⁹⁰ Michael Payne, "A Social History of York Factory and Churchill" (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 1989), vol. 1, 142.

⁹¹ J.B. Tyrrell (ed.), *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), Appendix A, 581.

⁹² John Nicks, "William Tomison," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography online*.

flawed, thus provided the impetus for many “drudges” at the posts to excel at more than menial duties. Working inland gave the servants independence; the men could travel vast distances and be their own bosses, to an extent, making their own decisions at these remote posts. They were obviously trusted by their superiors to do so.

In his study of labour relations of the HBC, Philip Goldring offered descriptions of each of the many tasks performed by servants in the fur trade, from traders or runners to postmasters. I will focus here on the particular tasks that took the Orkneymen away from the manual work or the trades — cooper, sawyer, tinsmith, boatbuilder, etc. — which usually kept the men inside the posts. Many of the jobs overlapped: an interpreter, for example, was a worker who had learned the local language and would help the outpost master with trade with the Indians—or this person might be one and the same. Orkney servants such as William Flett and John Park supervised posts at various times and learned the native languages as well.

Traders, also known as runners, were found in outposts and did much of their most important work outside the fort dealing with Indians in their camps.⁹³ According to Goldring, the period of the trader and runner belonged to the era of intense competition on the Saskatchewan district before the merger of the two Companies; Goldring observed that much of the runner’s success depended on his knowledge of the character, habits and language of local Indians, his judgment of furs and his ability as a winter traveller; runners, he suggested, were the backbone

⁹³ Philip Goldring, *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1821-1900*, Vol. 2 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1980), 229.

of the Company's resistance to competition wherever the trade was lively enough that the Indians could wait for the traders to come to them.⁹⁴

Many of the Orkney servants in the Saskatchewan district participated as traders during their tenure. James Folster was praised as a Cree Indian trader⁹⁵ and lived with them on the North Branch River during the winter of 1814-15, returning to Edmonton House regularly to pick up trade items. James Sandison, in addition to his work as a canoeman and boatbuilder, was also a trader and an assistant to James Bird in 1795.⁹⁶ In the spring of 1807, Bird recorded how Sandison was equipped with a "small assortment of goods" to pass the summer with Indians of the Nippewin area,⁹⁷ which is east of present-day Prince Albert and west of Cumberland House. Trade items varied from tobacco and liquor to pine kegs, kettles and ammunition. William Dunnett was also "a good runner after Indians."⁹⁸ Another trader was John Park who travelled across the Rocky Mountains with Joseph Howse's expedition and with Malcolm Ross in the Athabasca district,⁹⁹ as well as performing the duties of bowsman, cooper, steersman and occasional master. Being a trader or runner, then, was the essence of the fur trade, and took the men far inland to meet face to face with the various native groups for months at a time.

Learning the native languages — as interpreter or linguist — was an invaluable skill: James Whiteway and Magnus Spence were two of the

⁹⁴ Ibid, 231.

⁹⁵ HBCA, B.60/e/3, Fort Edmonton District Report, 1818-1819.

⁹⁶ HBCA, James Sandison, Biographical Sheets.

⁹⁷ HBCA B.60/a/6, fo.10d Fort Edmonton Post Journal 27 May 1807.

⁹⁸ HBCA, William Dunnett, Biographical Sheets.

⁹⁹ HBCA, John Park, Biographical Sheets.

Orkneymen who excelled at this venture. Whiteway successfully learned the languages of both the Muddy River (Blackfoot) and Swampy Ground Stone (Assiniboine) Indians and negotiated trade with them, travelling over the Rocky Mountains,¹⁰⁰ while Magnus Spence was described as a “good linguist” to the Blackfoot Indians.¹⁰¹ Acquiring indigenous languages required many months at a stretch living with the native groups. As Edith Burley noted, this was an important part of the company’s strategy: it provided information, helped build a skilled labor force, established amicable relations with aboriginal hunters and secured their furs, and freed the posts of a few mouths to feed.¹⁰²

In the competitive era between the building of the first Fort Edmonton in 1795 up to the amalgamation of the two fur trade companies, the importance of learning the native tongues was an asset and the men who acquired this skill were in demand. Examples of this competitiveness are evident in the records of Tomison and Peter Fidler in Saskatchewan journals and correspondence. In 1799, the journal noted the hiring of John Richards who was part Welsh, part Indian, at the request of Tomison; Richards was offered £30 per year for his services, (although Richards himself wanted £40 per annum for three years.) Although Richards was “fully qualified” for this job he was considered unreliable and went back and forth between the NWC and the HBC.¹⁰³ A year or so later, William Auld, an HBC inland trader, bemoaned the lack of men who knew the native

¹⁰⁰ HBCA, B.60/a/10 fo. 13.d, Fort Edmonton Post Journal 19 May, 1812.

¹⁰¹ HBCA, Magnus Spence, Biographical Sheets.

¹⁰² Edith Burley, *Servants of the Honorable Company* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 167.

¹⁰³ Alice M. Johnson (ed.), *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence, 1795-1802*, 201.

languages as he wrote his report from Green Lake. He knew the natives would choose to trade with the Canadians if no one in the HBC was able to negotiate in the Indian tongues.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, long-service Orkneymen such as Whiteway, Spence or Benjamin Bruce were regarded as valuable workers for their linguistic knowledge.

Learning the languages undoubtedly meant years of living with the particular native bands; for the long-service Orkneymen, linguistic ability was another indicator of their adaptability to life in the Northwest. How the men learned these languages is illustrated in a romanticized account of a fur trader, Hugh Monroe, who joined the HBC in the early 1800s. Though not an Orkneyman, he became a successful interpreter by living with the Blackfoot for at least a year. His experiences are described in *Rising Wolf, The White Blackfoot*,¹⁰⁵ which offers a picturesque look at one white man's experiences as he travelled, lived, and fought with the Blackfoot, almost becoming one of them in the process. The story suggests the efforts and long-term commitment necessary to learn the languages.

Specialized work, other than the trades, was another area in which the Orkney servants excelled. Hugh Gibson, listed as a runner and interpreter, was often noted in the post journals as caring for horses.¹⁰⁶ These animals were an important part of fur trade life, used for transportation as well as hauling meat and furs, and there are constant references to their care, the diseases they suffered, and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 230n

¹⁰⁵ James Willard Schultz, *Rising Wolf, The White Blackfoot* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919).

¹⁰⁶ HBCA, Hugh Gibson, Biographical Sheets.

the horse-stealing that was an ongoing occurrence. In April 1815, the journals makes a note of two Orkneymen sent off with 15 horses for Paint Creek to convey pemmican to Beaver River for Mr. Howse.¹⁰⁷ The horse yard was usually a distance from the actual post; horses had to be guarded against ever-present threat of being stolen. The horse-keeper frequently lived apart from the post, which, as Michael Payne has pointed out, had certain benefits: the servant could live independently and having his wife and children with him was tolerated; also the fact that the horse-yard was a distance from the post lessened the burden on the post itself.¹⁰⁸ Fishing was also a major occupation of the men at the posts, since fish, along with meat, was a major source of provisions. In an average year, about 24,000 fish – or one-fifth of the food rations — were caught for use at York Factory, Payne noted.¹⁰⁹ Peter Corrigan was one Orkneyman prized for his skill at fishing as well as being a canoe man who worked the route between Edmonton and Cumberland House.¹¹⁰ There are numerous references to Corrigan and others fishing and the vast quantity (by today's standards) that the men caught for consumption. One entry in the journals noted that seven men with 10 horse sleds were sent to God's Lake to fish; they returned four days later with 1,000 whitefish.¹¹¹ The success of the Orkneymen in this capacity has been noted earlier: explorer Sir John Franklin praised the skills of the Orkneymen in cold water, describing how they were always jumping into the water to lift boats over

¹⁰⁷ HBCA B. 60 a/13, fo. 28d, Fort Edmonton Post Journal 10 April 1815.

¹⁰⁸ Payne, "A Social History of York Factory and Churchill," vol. 1, 157.

¹⁰⁹ Payne, vol. 2, 439.

¹¹⁰ HBCA, Peter Corrigan, Biographical Sheets.

¹¹¹ HBCA B.60 a/17 fo.11d, Fort Edmonton Post Journal 30 December 1818.

the rocks and thus spent the day in wet clothes at a season when the temperature was freezing. He also praised how they carried immense loads.¹¹² Even Governor Simpson, despite his earlier prejudice against Orkney workers, agreed that they were superior fishermen.¹¹³ This success at fishing can be partly attributed to the tradition of the Orkney islands, where fishing was the mainstay of the islands' economy at a subsistence level. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Orkneymen served on English sloops bound for the Iceland and Greenland fisheries; they would be on the fishing grounds for three or four months at time.¹¹⁴

Another occupation of inland service at which the Orkney workers dominated was that of "outpost master" where the men lived deep in the wilderness at remote wintering or provision posts, meeting with the Indians to trade. John Park was at different times in charge of the Turtle Lake,¹¹⁵ and Little White Earth House, while James Folster was sent to take charge of a small post at Summerberry River (modern-day Pembina River) in 1821; William Flett took charge of many posts over his long career including Edmonton House in the absence of Francis Heron in the spring and summer of 1819.¹¹⁶ The success of the Orkneyman in inland service in particular was noted by Edward Umfreville, a fur trader with the NWC and then with the HBC under Tomison in 1788-89.¹¹⁷ Having worked on the North Saskatchewan for many years, he witnessed the

¹¹² Richard Glover, introduction to *Cumberland House Journals and Inland Journals 1775-82, Second Series 1779-82* (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1952), iv.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, xli.

¹¹⁴ William Thomson, *History of Orkney* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1987), 218.

¹¹⁵ HBCA , B.60/a/10, fo. 6, Fort Edmonton Post Journals 18 December 1811.

¹¹⁶ HBCA B.60/a/23, Fort Edmonton Post Journals, 19 May 1819.

¹¹⁷ E.E. Rich, "Edward Umfreville," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography on-line*.

skills of the Orkney workers firsthand. He praised their “prudent behaviour among the Indians”¹¹⁸ and noted that when they were scattered about the country they were held in high esteem by the Indians. As well, Umfreville praised the Orkney workers for their canoemanship, a prized skill in inland navigation, pointing out that the French Canadians, for all their dexterity on their long voyages, were not the only ones who were capable of such work.

Stationed at these posts for months at a time put the men in a good position to trade, but also in the way of potential violence. In the first few years of the 19th century, the present-day prairie provinces were still aboriginal spaces; many of the native groups were in competition for territory, and for access to guns and horses. The rivalry between the NWC and the HBC, as well as the rising competition of American traders, added to the atmosphere of violence.¹¹⁹ Travelling alone, even for a fur trader who knew the native languages, could be dangerous. William Flett was in charge of Acton House in the fall of 1811, and sent a request for reinforcements of men to face the “menaces” of the Indians.¹²⁰ Rivalries between Indians bands vying for trade often led to violent encounters and there are numerous references to these threats. Some of the fur traders at the posts feared for their lives, with good reason: there were occasional murders as in 1794 when three men — including Orkneyman William Annal, his Stone Indian wife and two children — were murdered by a party of about 200 Indians at South

¹¹⁸ Glover, li.

¹¹⁹ Gerhard Ens “Fatal Quarrels and Fur Trade Rivalries: A Year of Living Dangerously on the North Saskatchewan, 1806-07,” in *Alberta Formed Alberta Transformed*, Vol. 1 (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2006), 133.

¹²⁰ HBCA B.60/a/10, fo. 5, Fort Edmonton Post Journal 15 November 1811.

Branch House.¹²¹ Facing violence as they travelled inland was another challenge for the Orkneymen and another way in which they adapted to life in the Northwest, far from the relative safety of the bayside posts.

As these Orkneymen lived and travelled throughout the Saskatchewan district, they formed alliances with native bands. All of the men listed on Table 3.2 became husbands and fathers. There were undoubtedly others for whom data is not available (see Table 3.3). Their families are occasionally mentioned in the day-to-day journals. As most retired to Red River or other areas, their marriages were recorded in Church registers. Their wives were often baptized at this time and given different names.¹²² An accounting of the Orkneymen for whom we have data shows more than 100 children. In Table 3.3, I have listed the names of the wives and whether they were recorded as being Indian, Métis or of mixed-ancestry, as well as the number of children documented through birth and baptism records.

Although these men may have solemnized their marriages in church weddings at Red River, the men had alliances with these women long before that, during their inland duties. Most were married in the custom of the country before their church-sanctioned unions.

¹²¹ *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence*, 75-76n.

¹²² These documents are recorded in HBC archives, Gail Morin's *Métis Families A Genealogical Compendium*, volumes 1-6 (Pawtucket, R.I.: Quintin Publications, 2001), as well as in D. N. Sprague and R.P Frye, *The Genealogy of the First Metis Nation 1820-1900* (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1983).

TABLE 3.3
ORKNEYMEN: THEIR WIVES AND CHILDREN
Saskatchewan district, 1795 to 1830

	Spouse (includes date marriage recorded)	Children
James Gaddy Jr.	Mary	4
Oman Norquay	Jean Morwick, Métis, 1824	3
William Flett	Saskatchewan "Isabella" 1825	4
Magnus Spence	Wife not named	6
Benjamin Bruce	Matilda (Indian),	6
John Park	Margaret Metisse (Métis), 1823	6
George Flett	Margaret Whitford (Métis)	8
James Folster	Jane Cree	8
William Dunnett	Sophia Ballendine (Indian or half breed), 1830	5
Peter Corrigan	Christy (Indian), 1823.	1 son
Hugh Gibson	Christiana (Indian), 1829.	8
Andrew Setter	Margaret (Peggy) Spence, 1821	10
Robert Rowland	Elizabeth Flett (daughter of Wm. Flett)	5
Thomas Firth	Eliza (Métis), 1838	8
William Taylor	Sarah Sabiston 1827	4
James Whiteway	Mary Park (first wife, died before 1823); Ann Monkman (second), 1826.	8 (1 by first wife).
Robert Wilson	Jane Flett, 1851 at York Factory	1 son
William Gibson	Nancy Flett	?
James Sandison	Name of spouse unknown	Number unknown
John Moar (Moore)	Clemence Ross, Métis, 1824 RRS	9

Sources: HBCA Biographical Sheets; Gail Morin, Métis Families A Genealogical Compendium, vol. 1-6.; D. N. Sprague and R.P Frye, The Genealogy of the First Métis Nation 1820-1900.

James Folster and William Flett both travelled with their partners throughout their service; Benjamin Bruce was living with his family at Ile a la Cross at the time of his accidental death. He began living with his spouse, identified as an Indian or woman of mixed-ancestry named Matilda, in about 1791, just two years after he joined the HBC. Flett and John Moar (or Moore) and Robert Rowland were all recorded as living with several family members during 1822-23. These living arrangements, therefore, were long-term commitments. The role of these women and children was mostly undocumented in the pre-settlement years of the Canadian West, but their very existence indicates the Orkneymen's desire to enjoy family life during the long years they worked in the Northwest. These family units were well established before the men's retirement from the Company and their relocation to the Red River Settlement or other parts of the country. The fact they had families would indicate that they fulfilled their responsibilities as husbands and fathers and, like most men, wished to provide for their children as best they could. Since the option of retiring to Red River Settlement was open to them after 1816, they could remain in the Northwest.

The longevity of the Orkneymen as workers, their versatility at various tasks, their success at inland duties and their long-term alliances as husbands and fathers challenge the narrow view of the Orkneymen as obedient, reliable drudges. It has been too easy to dismiss the Orkneymen as a stereotype, in the same way that some might see the voyageurs in a limited fashion. My examination of Orkney service inland has demonstrated that many were highly skilled and valued servants. Many excelled at inland service, demonstrating that

they were equal, if not superior, to the Canadians at work on the boats and transporting cargoes through the vast distances of the interior. As fishermen they were highly proficient, due to the tradition of fishing as a livelihood back in the Orkneys, and in other independent tasks such as minding horses, which took them some distance from the posts. They also were successful in their work as interpreters, guides, postmasters and traders or runners. In these varied occupations they demonstrated their value to the Company at a period of intense competition and growth.

This chapter has demonstrated that the extent to which Orkneymen adapted to the country and learned valuable skill sets were important variables in defining how long they stayed in the HBC service and Rupert's Land. My next chapter explores this theme further by examining a number of specific case studies.

CHAPTER 4

Orkneymen who retired in Rupert's Land: Case studies

While we know much about the Orkney servants as a group, little attention has been given so far to individual men. This chapter provides a closer look at some of the Orkneymen who stayed in the Northwest and put down roots. Who were these men? I will focus here on six workers who joined up with the Hudson's Bay Company as young men, worked their entire adult lives with the Company, and retired in Rupert's Land. All of them established long-term relationships with native wives or wives of mixed-ancestry, raising families and leaving a significant imprint on life in a new land. A glimpse into their day-to-day lives as depicted in the post journals describes the tasks they performed and the ways in which they adapted to life in the Northwest, the dangers they faced, and what kind of workers they were, according to their superiors. Genealogical sources, on the other hand, help outline their family histories in the Northwest and the possible effect this had on their decision to not return home.

Through these case studies I will show how individuals made the decision to remain in the country rather than go back to the Orkney islands. How and when they established personal bonds with native women and the ways in which they provided for their families are important factors in outlining this process. Their personal choices illustrate their adaptability— how many of them learned native languages, acquired new skills including trading with various native groups and with rival fur traders, dealt with violence and survived difficult physical

challenges. The portraits have been put together using a variety of sources: the post journals, servants lists, Hudson's Bay Company biographical sheets, government scrip records and Gail Morin's compendium of Métis families, as well as specific scholarly works and family histories.

Examining these case studies of Orkneymen who stayed in the Northwest rather than return to the Orkney islands raises interesting questions about how they established homes in their new country. In the lives of particular individuals, we see how family and personal ties bound them more closely to their new homeland. There were many alliances between fur trade families: Robert Rowland married Elizabeth Flett, the daughter of William Flett, whose life is examined here. Oman Norquay's wife was Jean Morwick, daughter of Orkney worker James Morwick. When Norquay died, his widow married Orkneyman James Spence. Magnus Spence's daughter Christy married Peter Whitford, a boatman working out of Carleton House. Many of the Orkneymen in this study had sons who followed them into the fur trade business; their daughters married other fur trade servants. By bringing their sons into the business, these first generation Orkney workers were caring and providing for their families in practical and expedient ways. Thus economic as well as familial bonds tied the Orkneymen more closely to the land. Interconnecting lives and work created a foundation for the servants and their families for future generations to build on.

Where the Orkneymen chose to retire reveals another choice in the lives of these long-service servants. All of the six individuals highlighted here had to make decisions as to where to relocate with their families once their employment

with the HBC ended. Of course, it was far easier to return to the Orkney islands, as most servants did if they had no family in Rupert's Land or were willing to abandon their native families. There are instances of some long-service servants with families who still returned to Scotland, such as James Tate (or Tait), who left a wife and three children in Red River but retired and died in Stromness.¹²³ But most of those with families in the Northwest had obligations, and lived up to them. In the vast, sparsely populated spaces of today's prairie provinces, there were few options prior to the establishment of the Red River settlement in 1812 for a European man with a family to live. Later, with a growing population across the region, more settlements developing and the improvement of transportation and communication links, retiring fur trade servants could move where they wished; some Orkneymen even took their families back to the Orkney islands. But at the beginning of the 1800s, there were few locations where retired fur trade servants could go. The Red River settlement, set up in 1812 by the Earl of Selkirk as a new home for Scots displaced by the Highland clearances, was the logical and obvious choice. It was also possible for a retiring worker to go inland and join freemen bands¹²⁴ which were beginning to form in the period after 1800 and were usually attached to both a native band and a regional trading post.

¹²³ HBCA, James Tate, Biographical Sheets.

¹²⁴ Definitions and explanations of freemen bands are discussed in articles by Heather Devine and John Foster in *From Rupert's Land to Canada*. In "Les Desjarlais: The Development and Dispersion of a Proto-Métis Hunting Band, 1785-1870" Devine noted that the term "freemen" was originally used to describe Canadian and eastern engages who ended their employment with major trading companies and lived independently. Most had kin relations with native groups with whom they trapped and hunted. These bands were the basis of Métis ethnogenesis, described in depth by Foster in "Wintering, The Outsider Adult

One of the localities where freemen could make a living outside regular company employment and raise a family was at Ile a la Crosse, located northwest of present-day Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. With its interconnecting lakes and major rivers, it was prime fur trade country. By the late 18th century, this was a vital fur trade and trans-shipment centre and up until the merger of the two fur trade companies, it was also a hotbed of competition and violent confrontations. It soon became the HBC administrative district headquarters for English River. In her study of the Métis of the English River district, Brenda Macdougall provides a social and demographic portrait of this area. By the early 1820s, many retired servants from both companies resided there. A census of 1822 showed that there were 100 dependants at the three posts in the area: Ile a la Crosse, Lac la Ronge and Cold Lake.¹²⁵

Red River, however, was the obvious choice for retirement and most of the Orkneymen listed for the period I have studied ended up in this part of the Northwest. The area was particularly suited to fur traders, and with its Scottish contingent of residents would have been culturally familiar to men who grew up in the Orkney islands. In a contemporary chronicle about Red River, Scottish settler Alexander Ross, (not an Orkneyman), commented on the influx of Orkney workers in the late 1820s. He described them as possessing “well-known habits

Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis.” See Theodore Binnema, Gerhard Ens and R.C. Macleod (eds.) *From Rupert’s Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001).

¹²⁵ Brenda Macdougall, “Socio-Cultural Development and Identity Formation of Métis Communities of Northwestern Saskatchewan 1776-1907” (Phd dissertation, University of Saskatchewan, 2005).

of industry and frugality”¹²⁶ and praised their ability to save money and thus settle comfortably in the new country. Underscoring the stereotype of this group, Ross summed up their character as being quiet, honest and plodding; he also observed that most had established marital relationships during their service, and brought their native wives and mixed-ancestry children to Red River — a fact, he stressed, that set them apart from other Scottish settlers.

With the merger of the two fur trade companies in 1821 there was a surplus of personnel; arrangements were made to help retiring men and their families to relocate to Red River. When the council of the Northern Department met at Norway House in August, 1821, the question of how to deal with retiring servants and their families was a primary concern. Chief Factor James Sutherland was instructed to provide assistance to families of these servants in the Saskatchewan district whose contracts were about to expire, to move to Red River or any other place they chose. Governor George Simpson noted the necessity of discharging 250 men within the next year; accordingly, he ordered that those who didn’t want to go to Red River would have to provide for themselves.¹²⁷ Thus, retiring Orkney workers and others would have financial incentive to relocate with their families to a new community.

Some of the retiring servants probably became freemen and moved inland to join other freemen groups, although the records do not clearly show, in the case of Orkneymen at least, where these men went. Hugh Gibson was noted as being

¹²⁶ Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement; Its Rise, Progress and Present State* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1856), 110-11.

¹²⁷ R. Harvey Fleming (ed.), *Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert’s Land 1821-1831*, (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1940), 3.

“free inland”¹²⁸ but records show he was buried at Red River, so he obviously moved there eventually. Another Orkneyman, James Knight, was also listed as “free inland” but there is no further record of his whereabouts.¹²⁹ Historian John Foster detailed the establishment of freemen bands and their role in Métis ethnogenesis, through wintering, relationships with native women and the men in their families, and the formation of friendship and communities comprised of these second-generation inhabitants.¹³⁰ But specific Orkneymen who became freemen during this early period are difficult to trace. It is possible that some of these men were absorbed into Métis and French-Canadian communities and the Orkney connection was lost.

The following case histories tell the stories of six Orkneymen, their work and families, and what happened to them once they left the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company.

BENJAMIN BRUCE:

During his long career with the Hudson’s Bay Company, Benjamin Bruce had his share of hardship and conflict, once acting as a ringleader among other Orkneymen in refusing to obey orders. Born in the Orkney parish of Walls about 1771, he joined the Company at the age of 18. He would stay in the Northwest until he died in 1823. He was just under five feet, four inches in height. Working

¹²⁸ HBCA B.60/a/14, Account Book 1823.

¹²⁹ HBCA B.60/a/14, Account Book 1823.

¹³⁰ John Foster, “Wintering, the Outsider Male and Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis,” in *From Rupert’s Land to Canada* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 179-190.

out of York Factory on his arrival, he was first designated as labourer, middleman and bowsman — the most common roles for new recruits — from 1789 until 1799; then he moved to the Saskatchewan district where he was steersman, interpreter and assistant trader. Most labourers at that time began at about £6 per annum; by 1798, after about a decade with the company, Bruce was earning £18 per year as a steersman.¹³¹

Bruce adapted quickly to the country. In about 1791, he had married, in the custom of the country, an Indian or Métis woman named Matilda. Since Bruce would have been new in the Northwest and working at York Factory at the time, it is likely that Matilda was one of the Homeguard Cree who traded at the bayside posts. They became the parents of six children, four daughters and two sons. Their first son, William, joined his father in the fur trade. He was described as “active and spirited” and employed as a midman at Paint River.¹³² Bruce’s daughter Nancy married Patrick Cunningham, an Irishman who joined the HBC as a labourer in 1812.¹³³ Cunningham, described as a “spirited and able” 21-year-old midman in the list of servants for 1815,¹³⁴ worked with both Benjamin and William Bruce during this period. The fur trade thus became an inter-generational reality, in much the same ways that generations of men work in coal mines or on family farms.

¹³¹ Alice M. Johnson (ed.), *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence, 1795-1802*, (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1967), 131n

¹³² HBCA B.60/f/1, Fort Edmonton and District employees 1815.

¹³³ E.E. Rich (ed.), *Colin Robertson’s Correspondence Book Sept. 1817 to Sept. 1822* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1939), 209.

¹³⁴ HBCA B.60/f/1, Fort Edmonton Accounts 1815.

Benjamin Bruce was stationed at Edmonton House during the winter of 1796-97, according to the journal of Peter Fidler. Life in the sparsely populated fur country was full of challenges and dangers. In 1797, he and Donald Moat were ill with a fever and a violent cough and both were “reduced to mere skeletons.” As George Sutherland noted in a letter to William Tomison from Buckingham House, Bruce recovered from this illness, but Moat died a few days later.¹³⁵

During the period of intense competition with the Northwest Company, it was not uncommon for HBC workers to demand better wages or other benefits, threatening to move to the rival company if their demands were not met. Inland service was considered particularly onerous, as compared to living in a bayside post. Bruce was one of the dissenters; along with fellow Orkneymen John Irvin, Magnus Tate and Alexander Gun, they refused to obey orders to go to Beaver River and were left at Cumberland House. The men were holding out for higher wages, and knew they could get more money from the Canadians, who were short of experienced men.

As James Bird wrote in his Edmonton House journal:

Those who have principally distinguished themselves on this occasion are the following, John Irvin, Benjamin Bruce and Magnus Tate, whom we have sent down to the factory as deserving in our opinion the most exemplary punishment, the two former more especially as they have not only denied duty themselves but have practised every artifice to seduce others to follow their example.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence 1795-1802*, 129.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 198.

The men were fined £10 by the council at York — a considerable sum when Bruce’s yearly wage was only £18 at this time— but in 1801 the Governor and committee reduced the amount to £4 each on the grounds that “excessive punishments as well as lenient ones have their Evils.”¹³⁷ In this incident, Bruce demonstrated his initiative and perhaps rebelliousness in his fight to secure better wages, but also displayed the clannishness prevalent among many Orkneymen — many were unwilling to work with Canadians or Englishmen, although they were obliged to accept orders from the latter.¹³⁸ Sometimes the men balked at going inland due to physical dangers as well, especially the shortage of food (they would likely have to rely on fish) and extreme cold — frostbite was not uncommon.

Violence was an ever-present threat. As mentioned in the previous chapter, rivalry between various native groups as well as the ongoing competition with the North West Company led to some bloody confrontations. In the Chesterfield House journal of 1802, violence between the Fall Indians (Gros Ventre) and the “Iroquis” is noted. Bruce, along with three other Orkneymen, was sent to bury two Iroquois who had been murdered by the Fall Indians and the bodies treated in a gruesome manner.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, trade continued with the Fall Indians, albeit with some constraint. Bruce, like all other Orkneymen working inland, would face potential violence constantly and his decision to remain in the Northwest is an indication of his adaptability and suitability to his adopted homeland.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 204*n*

¹³⁸ Ibid, cii.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 313.

Bruce continued to be a competent servant and turned his hand to many tasks: he was one of 18 men, all Orkneymen, under Peter Fidler at Chesterfield House in 1801-02. He was a successful hunter. According to the list of personnel in 1815, Bruce was described as “active and good”; he was at this time in his early forties.¹⁴⁰ In the spring of 1816, Bruce, along with Peter Flett, Hugh Gibson and George Ward and three Indians, drove 50 horses to Red River.¹⁴¹

Bruce ended his career as an interpreter and assistant trader at Ile a la Crosse. As an interpreter, he would naturally have a command of one or more native languages. Available records do not indicate how long Bruce and his family had resided in this area, but we know a great deal about Ile a la Crosse itself and its economic importance, and, as mentioned earlier, it was a major trading and administrative centre.¹⁴² Brenda Macdougall’s study also describes the death of Benjamin Bruce: on April 19, 1823, “Old” Benjamin, as he was known, left the post to hunt waterfowl. While out in the bush, a tree branch fell on him, killing him. He did not return in the evening so his son and son-in-law, Patrick Cunningham went searching for him. At the wake, the Company provided a dram of whisky to everyone, and Cunningham provided a second dram. Bruce was buried at Landsman’s Point, Saskatchewan. According to Company records, Bruce left nothing to his heirs in his estate, having lost money to an Orkney speculator.

¹⁴⁰ HBCA, B.60/f/1, Fort Edmonton and District Employees 1815.

¹⁴¹ HBCA, B.60 a/15, fo. 36d, Fort Edmonton Post Journal, 13 May 1816.

¹⁴² Brenda Macdougall, “Socio-Cultural Development and Identity Formation of Métis Communities of Northwestern Saskatchewan 1776-1907” (PhD Dissertation, University of Saskatchewan, 2005).

Métis scrip records show that some of his family relocated to the Red River Settlement. Gail Morin's compilation of Métis families lists four generations of the Bruce family, all residing in southern Manitoba.¹⁴³ Scrip applications indicate that the descendants of Benjamin Bruce saw themselves as Métis. William, the first son mentioned earlier, married Francoise Allary and they had five sons. All were baptized in the parish of St. John's. Benjamin and Matilda's second son, James Bruce and his wife Mary were issued scrip from the Province of Manitoba on Sept. 20, 1876.¹⁴⁴ Their son Peter, born in St. John in 1835, and his wife Catherine also made application for scrip.¹⁴⁵

Bruce's versatility as a worker through the years and his decision to raise a family and provide for them cemented his bonds to his adopted homeland.

JAMES WHITEWAY:

James Whiteway is an example of an Orkneyman who adapted well to the environment of the northwest and earned praise from his superiors. Skill as an inland servant, an eagerness to learn and an obvious affinity for the aboriginal people made him an ideal servant.

In his district report of 1820-21, Francis Heron wrote:

On Dec. 4, James Whiteway and a party of Indians who accompanied him returned from an expedition beyond the Rocky Mountains, where I sent them last spring to try if possible to prevail on the inhabitants of these distant regions, to come with

¹⁴³ Gail Morin, *Métis Families A Genealogical Compendium*, vol. 1, 219-126

¹⁴⁴ Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Métis scrip records, RG15, volume 1319, series D-II-8-a, Reel c-14925.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

their valuable furs to trade at Rocky Mountain House, on this side of the Mountains, which first was partly established on their account. Whiteway and his party often suffering great hardships in their tracks at last succeeded in finding some Cootenay Indians who cheerfully acceded to his proposals, which they said would enable them to get rid of their present oppressors the North West Company.... Whiteway is of opinion that a very lucrative trade could be carried on among those Indians....¹⁴⁶

The above account describes the role Whiteway played in establishing new trade, a clear indication of what a useful servant he was. Not only was he a successful negotiator, but he endured hardships, he knew native languages and doubtless earned the respect of whatever potential trading party he was dealing with. The journals do not outline what their “hardships” consisted of, but it is safe to assume they were life-threatening challenges from lack of food to violence.

Born in Burray in 1778, James Whiteway entered the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company at age 20. He was a labourer based out of York Factory until 1803 when he was posted as interpreter inland from 1803 to 1811. By 1811, he was an interpreter in the Saskatchewan district, based out of Edmonton, where he remained until his retirement in 1823. The fact that he was an interpreter early in his career proved he had an affinity for native languages, as well as the interest to learn.

The Edmonton House journals record the work of Whiteway as he carried out various duties, from taking charge at inland posts to fetching meat for consumption at the post to planing timbers for building canoes. But it was his ability to learn native languages that is noteworthy. On May 19, 1812, James Bird

¹⁴⁶ HBCA, B.60/e/4, Fort Edmonton District Report 1820-21.

recorded that he had sent Whiteway to spend the summer with the Muddy River Indians, to learn their language as well as to “acquire certain Intelligence of the Americans on the Missouri River, and across the Mountains that we may be able to form some idea of the effect they may produce on the Trade of this River.”¹⁴⁷ By November, Whiteway was still living with the native bands. A few Missouri Indians, arriving at Edmonton House to trade, brought word to Bird that Whiteway was well. As discussed in the previous chapter, learning the native tongues meant living with the bands over long periods of time, as Whiteway obviously did successfully.

Subsequent entries in the journals refer to Whiteway’s skill as trader and interpreter, such as being sent with goods to meet the Swampy Ground Stone Indians, among others, usually in the company of other Orkneymen. Heron’s report 1818-19 noted that Whiteway, described as a Slave Indian interpreter, “proves himself on all occasions, to be a most interested servant, and is entitled by his zeal, to an advance of wages.”¹⁴⁸ The last records of his employment show him earning £30 per annum.

With his first wife, Mary Park, who was probably the mixed-ancestry daughter of a fur trader, Whiteway had a son, John. Mary Park died before 1823; they were together then long before he retired to Red River. His second marriage was to Ann Monkman, Métis, a union that produced three sons and four daughters. One of his sons, William, joined his father in the fur trade and was

¹⁴⁷ HBCA B.60/a/10, fo. 13d, Fort Edmonton Post Journal May 12, 1812.

¹⁴⁸ HBCA B.60/e/3, fo.2, Fort Edmonton District Report 1818-19.

described as a trader at the Lac du Brochet post in 1866.¹⁴⁹ James Whiteway died in 1838. What he did in the 15 years from his retirement to his death is not recorded. The census of 1827 shows him living at Red River. The amount of £104 in his estate was divided among his sons.¹⁵⁰ Three generations of his family are documented, and Métis scrip records offer further clues as to the future of Whiteway's family.¹⁵¹ There are at least 10 applications for scrip which indicate his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren settled and farmed in the Red River area. His son Joseph, born in 1830, was issued scrip in the amount of \$160 on August 20, 1870; the above-mentioned son William twice applied for a patent for land in St. Andrew's in the Red River region in 1874. Scrip was also issued in the name of James Whiteway's daughter-in-law, Chloe Spence, in 1876 and to Chloe's daughter, Mary McDonald.

OMAN NORQUAY:

This fur trader stands out in Canadian history as the grandfather of the first premier of Manitoba, John Norquay, who served the province from 1878 to 1887. Mount Norquay in Banff National Park was named after him in 1904 as well.

Oman Norquay was born about 1773 in South Ronaldsay, Orkney, the same parish that produced Hudson's Bay Company chief factor William Tomison. He joined the company in 1791. Along with Benjamin Bruce, mentioned above and about 30 others, Norquay was one of the Orkneymen stationed at Edmonton

¹⁴⁹ David Pelly, *The Old Way North: Following the Oberholtzer-Magee Expedition* (St. Paul, Minn.: Borealis Books, 2008), 46.

¹⁵⁰ HBCA, James Whiteway, Biographical Sheets.

¹⁵¹ LAC, Métis scrip records, RG15, series D-II-8-a, Vol. 1322, Reel c-14930.

House in the 1796-97 season. Norquay was listed as labourer, canoeman and bowsman in his servants' accounts. He sailed on the Seahorse to York Factory, was employed at Cumberland and Edmonton until 1811, then middleman at Paint River and Carlton in the Saskatchewan district until 1818. He started out earning £6 per year; by 1810, he had been signed on again for three years at £20 per annum; five years later he was described as a "stout, good servant" and was still earning the same wage.¹⁵²

Although Norquay never progressed to the designation of trader, interpreter or outpost master, he was a reliable worker who adapted to the challenging inland service, carrying cargo, trapping foxes, making goods such as skin coats for the Indian trade, working out of Buckingham House and Carlton House. He was noted as a "verry (sic) good servant but weak for going up and down."¹⁵³ This weakness likely meant he was suitable for everyday work but was unable to handle the strain of moving cargoes on the boat brigades travelling to the Bay, loaded with furs. In 1799, Tomison singled him out, along with two others, as being willing to go to Swan River to pick up more provisions needed for the men labouring inland.¹⁵⁴

On his retirement in 1819, Norquay became part of a unique, short-lived settlement experiment in the Red River area. Several families of retired Orkney servants chose to settle on the north banks of the Assiniboine River.¹⁵⁵ The

¹⁵² HBCA B.60/f/1, Fort Edmonton and District Employees 1815.

¹⁵³ *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence, 1795-1802*, 39n.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 190.

¹⁵⁵ Barry Kaye, "Birsay Village on the Assiniboine," *The Beaver*, outfit 312, (1981-82), 18.

families included Magnus Spence, who appeared to be the leader; he named the village Birsay, after his home parish in the Orkney islands. James Sandison was another resident. The location was suitable for many reasons, mainly its proximity to the buffalo hunting grounds, but destruction of the crops by grasshoppers and an outbreak of whooping cough and measles decimated the tiny settlement. Norquay lost one child to sickness while Sandison lost two. The village was soon abandoned and the settlers were absorbed into the mainstream population of Red River. Norquay was married to Jean Morwick, the daughter of another Orkneyman, James Morwick. Oman died in 1820 at age 47.

Two years after Oman's death, his widow married James Spence, another Orkneyman from the Saskatchewan district who had worked as a tailor. He and Jean had two children of their own. Previous to this marriage, James had several children by an Indian woman named Mary. Although the record of this marriage is unclear, suffice to say that family connections continued as Orkneymen and their spouses put down roots and the communities they helped to found became more and more intertwined.

WILLIAM FLETT:

Of all the adaptable, versatile long-serving servants in the Saskatchewan district during the time period being studied, Flett was among the most adaptable and versatile. From labourer he progressed to steersman and was a highly-regarded canoe builder, hunter, Indian trader and outpost master. His career with the Company spanned 40 years and his contribution stands out for reasons beyond his longevity. In 1819, he was left in charge of Edmonton House and kept his own

journal during this time, one of the few Orkneymen to do so. As well, Flett's descendants have been well documented in various family histories.¹⁵⁶ Because Flett was the most common name, along with Spence, from the Orkney islands, it is difficult to sort out all the Fletts and to ascertain who was related to whom. Several other Fletts are listed in the Saskatchewan district accounts during this period, most from the same parish in Orkney — they were possibly cousins. However, in the case of the William Flett being studied here, his life trajectory is fairly easy to follow.

Born in the parish of Firth about 1762, he signed on as a labourer, arriving at York Factory in 1782. Soon after his arrival, the fort was attacked by the French; Flett was imprisoned in France but signed on again with the Company the next year. His usefulness to the Company is noted early on where he is described as being “useful in hunting buffalo” and considered the only person at Edmonton House who could kill a beast when needed.¹⁵⁷

In the following years Flett was not only valued for his skills building canoes but was also put in charge of various posts. In late 1799 Fidler left him to oversee Greenwich House at Lac la Biche;¹⁵⁸ later he was master at Acton House, Little White Earth House and Rocky Mountain House. On Sept. 13, 1812, James Bird noted that he sent off 10 men in a large boat loaded with goods for Little White Mud and Acton Houses, the latter of which was under the charge of Flett

¹⁵⁶ One family history of note is written by Flett's great-great-great grandson, Vernon R. Wishart, in *What Lies Behind the Picture? A Personal Journal into Cree Ancestry*, published by the Central Alberta Historical Society in 2006.

¹⁵⁷ *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence, 1795-1802*, 60.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 227.

“and I have no doubt of his fulfilling his Duties of his Situation satisfactorily.”¹⁵⁹

Like most Orkneymen who had benefited from Scotland’s educational system where every parish was required to have a school, Flett was literate, and therefore useful in the role of master. He must have possessed a certain authority as well to supervise other men.

As the master of numerous posts, Flett faced the constant threat of violence. There are many references to Flett and others calling for reinforcements, to building stockades, to standing guard against horse thieves or abandoning posts altogether due to escalating tensions. Maintaining the Indian trade and staying out of violent confrontations was a constant reality in the Saskatchewan district, especially in the years leading up to the merger. For instance, Francis Heron put Flett in charge of the Edmonton District for the summer of 1819 along with a clerk, four interpreters and 15 men. Heron went to Dog Rump House, but abandoned it due to potential conflict with the Stone and Slave Indians¹⁶⁰ who had been at war for four years.

Despite his faithfulness and competence, Flett grew increasingly bad-tempered as the years passed, according to one of his superiors. Just as other servants were criticized or disciplined for disobedience and insolence, Flett was not a perfect employee. Heron complained that Flett was no longer of use as a trader because he was too easily ruffled by the Indians and was getting old (Flett

¹⁵⁹ HBCA B.60 a/10, fo. 2, Fort Edmonton House Post Journal 13 September 1812.

¹⁶⁰ HBCA B.60/e/3, Fort Edmonton District Report 1818-1819.

would have been in his early 50s by this time). Heron commented, however, that Flett was still honest, interested and useful around the fort in some capacities.¹⁶¹

Flett's long, varied career singles him out as a versatile, adventurous, capable worker. He was married in the custom of the country to a Cree woman named Saskatchewan (baptized Isabella) and they had four children. The oldest daughter Elizabeth, or Betsy, married another Orkneyman, Robert Rowland. After retiring to Red River in 1823, Flett died within a few months and was buried Nov.14, 1823. His will stipulated that his monies be put in trust for "the sole use and benefit" of his wife and children.¹⁶² His wife Saskatchewan figures prominently also in the history of the Northwest, even after her husband's death, as she was part of a contingent of Red River settlers who migrated to Oregon district in 1841. Her son William Jr. was working and living at Red River in the years after his father's death, with four children of his own, but he joined the Oregon migration with his mother, and remained on the West Coast.¹⁶³ Saskatchewan, or Isabella, returned to Red River and died in 1845.

ROBERT WILSON:

During a 40-year career with the Company, Robert Wilson performed a variety of tasks from boatbuilder to postmaster to clerk. He worked all over the Northwest, from Norway House to the Saskatchewan district, where he was employed for six years. He was transferred to Severn, York Factory and finally

¹⁶¹ HBCA, B.60/e/3, Fort Edmonton District Report 1818-1819.

¹⁶² Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Ltd., 1980), 45.

¹⁶³ Vernon Wishart, *What Lies Behind the Picture?* (Edmonton: Central Alberta Historical Society, 2005), 45.

Oxford House, where he died in 1864 at age 65.¹⁶⁴ Wilson is one of the few Orkneymen studied here who worked for many years at a bayside post, rather than retire inland or move to Red River. Born in Stromness, he joined the service in 1820 at about the age of 20.

Wilson's choices indicate that he still maintained strong ties with his home islands. Many of the Orkney servants during this period in the Saskatchewan district worked at various jobs inland, adapted to native ways and customs, and retired inland to Red River. Wilson's trajectory is slightly different; obviously his skills as a clerk made him useful at the bayside posts. He may have preferred life in the posts as opposed to inland work.

We also learn more about Wilson from letters he sent home, some of them undelivered, and that have been saved in the Hudson's Bay archives. The correspondence reveals he was a loyal son and sent money regularly to his parents back home. In one letter, dated July 7, 1833, he admonished his brother, James, a sailor, for not keeping in touch with their parents back in Orkney.¹⁶⁵ He criticized another brother, John, for also neglecting their parents in Orkney. As well, he wrote to a merchant, Thomas Halcrow, in Stromness in 1840 – and instructed him to give money to his parents. He also asked Halcrow to “please supply to my account my name son Robert with a full suit of desent (sic) Cloth and pay his schooling for the Year.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ HBCA, Robert Wilson, Biographical Sheets.

¹⁶⁵ Judith Hudson Beattie and Helen M. Buss (eds.), *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of North America, 1830-57* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 44.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 44.

The letters of Letitia Hargrave, wife of the Chief Factor James Hargrave, give more insight into Wilson's life. They were at York at the same time, and in her letters, Hargrave recorded her impressions of life at the post. She derided Wilson pitilessly as the "butt of the party being an Orkney man"¹⁶⁷ and wondered why he was promoted, making fun of his speech and appearance, ridiculing his attempts to find a wife. An educated Scotswoman, Letitia Hargrave obviously looked down on Orcadians and likely was class-conscious; she had yet to discover "that men from the rugged Orkney islands, both officers and servants, had been and still were the backbone of the Company's trade in Rupert's Land."¹⁶⁸

Wilson married Jane Flett in 1851 at Oxford House. According to Hargrave's letters, Wilson's wife was an Orkney woman who came over by ship and was apprenticed to a dressmaker in Red River — an unusual occurrence in a place where most of the European men married indigenous women. Perhaps Wilson felt more comfortable with someone from back home, or she may have been someone he knew from childhood. Their son, Robert Cummins Wilson was born the next year. This son was sent back to the Orkney islands for an education, returning to North America in 1871, when at the age of 19, he became an apprentice clerk at York Factory. Like his father, the son remained in the Company service all his life, working as a clerk in the districts of Moose Factory, Albany, Lac la Pluie and Lake Superior. He retired in 1910 due to health reasons,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 47.

¹⁶⁸ Introduction by Margaret Arnett Macleod to *The Letters of Letitia Hargrave* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1947), xxxiii.

and died in Port Arthur in 1913.¹⁶⁹ Genealogical records show that he was married twice and had four children, all in the Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) region.

Wilson's life story shows that not all Orkneymen who stayed in North America followed a similar path. He married at a later age than most men in the fur trade and he adapted to life in Rupert's Land in quite a different fashion than William Flett or James Whiteway. His son followed him in the business but he obviously saw the wisdom of sending him home for an education. Nevertheless he remained in his new country.

WILLIAM ROWLAND:

This Orkneyman, from the parish of Birsay, was another long-service worker who retired and put down roots in the Edmonton district. Rowland joined the Company in 1820, and for the next two decades, he was labourer and fisherman in the Cumberland district, just east of the Saskatchewan district. From 1840 to 1864, he was affiliated with the Saskatchewan district as labourer, midman, hunter and trader. In his later years, he was stationed at Fort Pitt which had been established in 1829 as a half-way post between Edmonton and Carlton and in 1871 he was listed as a freeman in the Saskatchewan district. He was married to Betsy Ballendine, a Métis woman, and they had 13 children. Rowland's large family and decision to remain in the Fort Edmonton area made a significant imprint on the growth of the community. His children, grandchildren,

¹⁶⁹ HBCA Robert Cummins Wilson, Biographical Sheets.

great-grandchildren and beyond settled in Edmonton, St. Albert, Lac la Biche and Tofield, to name a few centres.¹⁷⁰ He died in 1875.

Rowland's wife, Betsy, was herself the daughter of Orkneyman John Ballenden (the spellings varied) and a Cree mother. Betsy had three sisters and a brother; her sister Sophia married another Orkney worker who is among the long-service men covered in this thesis: William Dunnett (or Dennett). Dunnett was a labourer, canoeman and runner in the Company for about 30 years before retiring as a freeman to Red River in 1823.¹⁷¹ The intermarriage of fur trade servants and their families, as we have seen, was a defining characteristic of many of the new communities growing in the Canadian West.

Although Rowland did not work in the Saskatchewan district during the time period covered by this study, his life is worth examining because of his decision to remain in the Edmonton region. In mid-century this was still a sparsely populated fur trade centre. A population of 150 at the fort, three isolated mission stations and 10 outlying fur trade posts were all that existed. The region we now know as Alberta probably had a total population of 2,000 including white and mixed-race at this time, while the native population was at least 5,000.¹⁷² The transition to a more agriculturally based economy had not yet occurred and the fur trade and the buffalo hunt were still a mainstay for inhabitants of the region.

Rowland likely enjoyed success as a trader and hunter on contract to the Company, and must have seen the potential for more economic opportunities for

¹⁷⁰ Gail Morin, *Métis Families A Genealogical Compendium*, vol. 5, 70-73.

¹⁷¹ HBCA, William Dunnett, Biographical Sheets.

¹⁷² J.G. Macgregor, *Edmonton: A History* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1967), 69.

his large family. Free traders moved in from Red River, and Métis communities around Edmonton began to grow — these factors lessened the grip of the HBC and may have increased the competitive advantage for veteran fur trade servants such as Rowland.

Rowland can be viewed as a patriarch whose numerous descendants peopled the area around Edmonton. His children were born over a 28-year period, from the first son, William, born in 1827 at Cumberland House to the youngest, Alexander, born in 1855 at Fort Pitt. The oldest son also joined the Company, working as hunter, interpreter and trader, much like his father had done. William Rowland II established himself in Edmonton society in a variety of ways.¹⁷³ He adapted to changing economic circumstances, bought land in the centre of the community and made the transition to farming, although he still worked occasionally for the Hudson's Bay Company as trader and freighter. He became active in the community: in 1881, along with fellow citizens Matt McCauley (who became the city's first mayor) and Malcolm Groat, he helped to found the first school.¹⁷⁴

Government records show the Rowland family made numerous applications for scrip, indicating that the mixed-ancestry descendants of the first William

¹⁷³ Much of the information on the younger William Rowland is taken from an honours paper written by University of Alberta student Terence O'Riordan in 2001 entitled "Separate Paths: William Rowland and Abraham Salois: Adjustments to the Changing Economy of the Edmonton Area, 1854-1885."

¹⁷⁴ The younger Rowland married Helene Beauregarde, and they had seven children. He moved to Beaver Lake near Tofield where he continued to farm, and died there in 1907 at the age of 83.

Rowland identified themselves as Métis. Of William and Betsy Ballendine's 13 children, 11 received scrip.

* * * * *

The foregoing case studies of Orkneymen illustrate the different ways in which individuals adapted to the fur trade. These six men had many characteristics in common: they were long-service servants with the HBC, they were versatile in their occupations, adapting well to the environment of Rupert's Land. With the exception of Wilson, all made alliances in the custom of the country and raised numerous children. As well, they all retired in Rupert's Land, rather than return to the Orkneys. Their longevity indicates they found satisfaction in their long careers with the HBC. They probably liked the independence of life in the vast, underpopulated region, so different from the tiny islands of their birth. Family obligations emerged as a crucial factor in their remaining in the Northwest. Applications for scrip later in the 19th century reveal that many of the children and grandchildren of these men saw themselves as Métis.

Some differences also emerge in comparisons of these men. Their particular skills as fur traders varied: James Whiteway excelled in native languages, while William Flett was a multi-skilled servant who could do anything from building a canoe to manning a post. Robert Wilson was a clerk and postmaster for many years, an indication, perhaps of his administrative capabilities. While most of these men retired to Red River—as did most servants at the time — William Rowland settled down in the Edmonton region, most likely indicative of expanded opportunities in that region after the 1860s. And they were all different in

personality, with some more inclined to rebelliousness, as in Bruce's case. But the similarities outweigh the differences as the men and their families put down roots in Western Canada: some remained in the fur trade, others tried their hand at farming in Red River.

More importantly, in relation to my larger thesis showing that many Orkney servants stayed 20 years or more, these men were not exceptions to the rule. These case studies also illustrate the ways in which individual workers adapted to the country. The men were not stereotypical of the Orkney servant portrayed in most literature. By learning a variety of skills—interpreter, linguist, post master, trader, clerk — they became useful to the Company and were versatile in ways that labourers and tradesmen were not. Through marriages with Indian or mixed-ancestry women, they established ties with native groups for trading purposes and forged personal bonds. They cared for their families enough to stay in the country and found employment for their sons in the fur trade, while their offspring married the sons and daughters of other Orkneymen. Robert Wilson's trajectory was slightly different, especially with his marriage and his ties to the islands, but he remained committed to the Company rather than return home; he worked all over the Saskatchewan district as well, demonstrating his versatility as a servant. These six men found fulfillment both economically and personally in Rupert's Land, while their children and future generations became part of a new society.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Throughout Rupert's Land in the years 1795 to 1830, the HBC servants from the Orkney islands were the backbone of the fur trade. Most historians acknowledge this numerical importance—about 80 per cent of workers with the HBC came from the Orkney islands during this period of peak recruitment—but downplay its longer-term significance in noting that most of these servants were short-term employees who returned to the Orkney Islands. My research, however, suggests that at least in the inland district of Saskatchewan, a vast district in itself, Orkney servants not only numerically dominated the HBC work force, but a significant number remained in the West after their service was over. These findings call for a re-examination of the influence of Orkneymen not only in the HBC service but also in the West generally.

In addressing some of these gaps, my research has provided a fresh look at these servants, particularly those who remained in the Northwest. They adapted well to the new country through an employment trajectory that illustrated their versatility, in comparison to the tasks of the majority of the workers. An examination of the records from this era show that about one-quarter were long-term workers who stayed at least 20 years in Rupert's Land; many of this subset of servants had wives and children, and put down roots in the new country, retiring in the Canadian West — usually to Red River — rather than return to their home islands. While most historians view them as a homogenous group, often a stereotype —the sturdy, thrifty, hardworking drudge— records indicate

that there was diversity in their ranks. Many acquired skills beyond those of labourer and boatmen, learned native languages and native customs. Looking at the men in the Saskatchewan district reveals a considerable range in occupation, skills, character and choices. Contrary to the criticisms of officials such as Colin Robertson or Gov. George Simpson, who characterized Orkneymen as slow, obstinate, clannish servants in comparison to the voyageurs, many were adaptable men with courage, versatile in many tasks from fishing to building canoes to trading, and were often beloved by native groups. As my analysis has shown, these factors of occupational diversity and familial ties were likely important variables in the men's decision to stay.

Records of the 162 men who worked in the Saskatchewan district contradict the view of historians such as John Nicks and Philip Goldring, who looked at the Orkney workers from the islands themselves. These historians argue that most of the workers saw employment in Rupert's Land as a means to an end— a chance to save money in order to return to Scotland after one or two contracts with the Company, when they could invest in farms and businesses. Certainly most did return, but there were many servants who remained in Rupert's Land. Money was obviously not the only incentive. A closer look at the employment paths from this period indicates that occupational adaptation and family bonds were the primary reasons the men stayed—the relationship the Orkneymen had with the Company over the long term was more than a business one. The majority of workers in the Saskatchewan district signed on as labourers and remained so, but the ones who stayed in the Northwest learned other skills.

Their willingness and success at useful occupations were significant factors in their adaptation to their new homeland.

Michael Payne's study of the York Factory and Churchill posts gave us an idea of what life was like there, a place where the Orkney workers were a large contingent, although not the only national or ethnic group. Studying the men in the Saskatchewan District, however, gives us a different perspective on the lives and work of these men. Away from the bayside posts, where most of the work was manual, the men had to learn inland skills and live in close proximity, often with, native bands. That meant facing physical challenges in the interior, including possible starvation, and violence. Many learned native languages; this skill was necessary for trade purposes. Being an interpreter, or linguist, would make the worker more valuable to the Company. This work took the Orkney labourer out of the Fort and entailed living for long periods with aboriginal bands. In this process they not only acquired native wives and families, but acculturated to a new way of life.

The Orkneymen as husbands and fathers is another significant role that deserves consideration in the examination of the history of the West. While historians have credited the Orkney workers as valuable employees, their contribution as family men has not been fully appreciated. Of the long-service servants in my study who stayed at least 20 years, I have been able to establish that about half of that number started families. Social historians such as Jennifer Brown and Sylvia Van Kirk have explored the role of European fathers and aboriginal women in the formation of a new society, but none has singled out the

Orkneymen as a particular element in fur trade marriage and family life. Rather, the Orkney connection has been simply a small part of this European component in the demographics of the early West: men from England, Ireland, Norway and other parts of Scotland have also been a large part of the mix. While Orkneymen dominated the HBC workforce in the early 19th century, as we have seen, their role as family men has been overshadowed by their abilities as workers.

My research has focused on the importance of family ties to the men who remained in the Northwest: these ties were important factors separating the men who went home from the ones who stayed. Many of the Orkney servants established relationships with aboriginal women early in their career, and raised children. These were long-term commitments; the men had obligations to their families that workers without wives and children did not. They chose to stay and support them. There were many benefits to family life, economic as well as personal: kinship ties to native bands facilitated trade, the women were skilled and useful in many tasks, and marriage and children obviously brought comfort and companionship to men living far inland. Retiring to Red River was a practical choice for the men with families: they could remain in Rupert's Land and could continue work in the fur trade, or their sons could.

Histories of the six men studied in detail in the previous chapter illustrate how these personal relationships tied the men more permanently to the country, and to each other. In each case, there were marriages between families and their children married offspring of other fur trade servants. As noted, these individual men brought their sons into the fur trade as a practical way in which to provide for

their families. The Orkneymen became patriarchs whose descendants populated the West. The assertiveness of the Orkney father in such circumstances points to “patrifocality” and “male centrality” and its role in the emergence of Métis peoples, as discussed by John Foster,¹⁷⁵ who stressed the role of the outsider male and the enculturation of children in this process. With the exception of Robert Wilson, the men described in this chapter were the building blocks of English mixed-race communities, and the applications for scrip by many of the children and grandchildren confirm their Métis identity. As such, these Orkneymen and others like them must be considered a significant element in the ethnogenesis of the English Métis.

Studying the Orkney workers of the Saskatchewan district has revealed new dimensions about this group at a crucial period of fur trade history. My thesis has shown that fully one-quarter of the Orkneymen stationed in the Saskatchewan district stayed 20 years or more. Long-term employment, then, was an attractive option for many, even the ones who decided to return to the islands. Many adapted to the new environment of Rupert’s Land, learning useful skills and interacting successfully with the aboriginal inhabitants. A small but significant number adapted so well that they remained in the new country, staying with their native or mixed- ancestry wives and children, and retiring in various parts of the West. Their numbers and contribution invite a critical reassessment of their

¹⁷⁵ John E. Foster, “Wintering, the Outsider Male and Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis,” in *From Rupert’s Land to Canada : Essays in Honour of John E. Foster* (Edmonton: U of A Press, 2001), 181-182.

adaptability and the overall importance of the Orkney workers in a Western Canadian context.

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Appendix I – Men who worked in Sask. District 1795-1830

*For Company history, year is in bold type where date of entry is known.
 Approximate years with Company in parenthesis
 Exp. Refers to contract expiry date if date of entry unknown

NAME	PARISH, D.O.B.	COMPANY* HISTORY	OCCUPATION (highest level achieved)	STAY OR RETURN HOME?
ALLEN, Nicholas	Burray 1760	1783 -1800 (17)	bowsman	HOME
ANNAL, Peter	S. Ronaldsay	1821-24 (3)	midman	unknown
ANNEL, Robert	S. Ronaldsay	1796 (3)	labourer	unknown
ANNAL, William (1)	Orkney 1802	1823 (5)	cooper	unknown
ANNEL, William (2)	S. Ronaldsay	exp. 1816 (5)	labourer	unknown
BALLENDEN, John (1 or 3)	Orkney	1795-1800 (5)	boatman	unknown
BEWS, Thomas	S.Ronaldsay 1761	1796 (5)	labourer	unknown
BROWN, Alexander	Ronaldsay	exp. 1816 (5)	labourer	unknown
BROWN, Edward	Orkney	1796-1802 (7)	boatman	unknown
BROWN, Thomas	Orkney 1799	exp. 1824 (5)	labourer	unknown
BRUCE, Benjamin	Walls 1770	1789 -1823 (34)	interpreter	Retired to Ile a la Crosse
BUDGE, Gilbert	S. Ronaldsay	1809 (2)	cooper	unknown
BUDGE, John	S. Ronaldsay 1775	1793 -1816 (23)	canoeman	unknown

CLOUSTON, John Jr.	Orkney	1796-1800 (5)	labourer	unknown
CLOUSTON, John Sr.	Stenness 1768	1794-1800 (5)	canoeman	unknown
CLOUSTON, Magnus	Stromness	1809-1814 (5)	middleman	HOME
CORRIGAL, John	Evie	1813(less than 5)	labourer	Drowned 1813
CORRIGAL, John (another)	Evie 1785	1806-1820 (14)	steersman	HOME
CORRIGAL, Peter	Orphir 1782	1797 -1823 (26)	fisherman	retired to RRS
CORRIGAL, William 1 or 2	Harray 1777	1800-1814 (14)	bowsman	HOME
CRAIGIE, Hugh	Rousay	1795-1812 (17)	midman	unknown
CRAIGIE, William	Rousay 1765	1798-1816 (18)	labourer	unknown
DICKSON, James	Harray	1812-1817 (5)	blacksmith	HOME
DOARAN (Deron) John	Birsay 1779	1795, 1812 (20+)	lancemaker	unknown
DUNNETT, Malcolm	Orkney	1815 (5)	midman	unknown
DUNNET, William	S. Ronaldsay 1779	1796 -1823 (27)	trader	colonist to RRS
FIRTH, Thomas	Stromness 1796	1815 -1834 (19)	guide	freeman to RRS
FLETT, Alexander	Orphir	1787 (15)	trader	joined NWC 1802
FLETT, George	Firth 1776	1796 -1823 (27)	outpost master	retired to RRS

FLET(T), John	Firth 1764	1782 -1816 (32+)	boatman	unknown
FLETT (John)	Firth	1804-1815 (11)	labourer	HOME (disabled)
FLETT, John	Firth	exp. 1812 (less 10)	midman	HOME
FLETT, Peter	Firth	1818-1822 (4)	labourer	unknown
FLETT, Robert	Orphir 1779	1797 (5)	labourer	unknown
FLETT, Samuel	Harray	exp.1817 (5)	midman	unknown
FLETT, William C.	Firth	1809 (5)	midman	unknown
FLETT, William Jr.	Firth	exp. 1816(5)	midman	unknown
FLETT, William, Sr.	Firth 1762	1782 -1823 (41)	outpost master	retired to RRS
FOLSTER, James	Birsay 1771	1792 -1823 (31)	trader	retired to RRS
FORBEST (Forbes), John	Firth 1770	1790-1803 (13)	bowsman	deserted to NWC
FOUBISTER, John	St. Andrews 1783	1806 -1826 (20 years)	midman	HOME
GADDY, James Jr.	Kirkwall 1774	1791 -1823 (32)	interpreter	retired to RRS
GADDY, James Sr.	Kirkwall, 1760	1781 -1800 (19)	interpreter	HOME
GARRICK, Robert	Orphir	1800 (5)	steersman	unknown
GARRIOCH, William	Stromness	1813 (20+)	writer	probably to RRS
GARROCK, Robert 2nd	Orphir 1771	1791-1811 (20)	labourer	unknown

GARROCK, Robert first	Orphir 1762	1782-1807 (24)	labourer	HOME
GARSON, George	Orkney	1800-1802 (3)	tailor	unknown
GARSON, Robert	Sandwick	1787 (5)	canoeman	unknown
GIBSON, George	Stromness	exp. 1816 (5)	midman	unknown
GIBSON, Hugh	Rousay 1780	1797 -1823 (26)	interpreter	free inland
GIBSON, William	Rousay 1788	1804-1823 (19)	midman	retired to RRS
GIBSON, Hugh (another)	Stromness	exp. 1816 (5)	bowsman	unknown
GOUCHER, Thomas	Orkney	1796-97 (3)	labourer	unknown
GROAT, Malcolm	S. Ronaldsay 1765	1785 -1803 (18)	steersman	Home 1803
GUN, Alexander	S. Ronaldsay 1768	1790 -1809 (19)	bowsman	unknown
GUN, George	Orphir 1770	1791 -1799 (8)	labourer	HOME
GUTCHER (Goucher) George	S. Ronaldsay 1774	1792 -1810 (18)	canoeman	HOME
HALCRO (Halcrow), James	Orphir 1771	1789 -1802 (13)	steersman	unknown
HARCUS, J.	Westray 1798	1817-1822 (5)	midman	unknown
HARPER, William	Evie	1809-1816 (7)	bowsman	unknown
HAWKLAND, Will	Stromness	1787-1796 (9)	labourer	unknown

HAY, James	Orphir 1781	1797-1799 (3)	labourer	HOME 1799
HOURIE, James	St. Ola 1769	1791-1796 (5)	bowsman	unknown
HOURIE, John	St. Ola 1775	1809-1816 (7)	steersman	unknown
HOURSTON, Samuel	Orkney	1801 (5)	labourer	unknown
HOWSTON, Hugh	Kirkwall 1765	exp. 1815	steersman	unknown
HOWSTON, James	Kirkwall	exp. 1816 (5-10)	steersman	unknown
HUTCHINS (Hutchinson) James	Orphir 1772	1791 -1796 (5)	canoeman	unknown
IRVIN (Irvine) John	Stromness 1771	1785 -1802 (17)	steersman	unknown
ISBASTER (Isbister), Thomas	Harray 1773	1792-1797 (5)	labourer	DIED Carleton House of abscess 1797
ISBISTER, James	Sandwick	1811 (5-10)	midman	HOME
Isbester, Magnus	Orkney	1799-1800 (5)	labourer	unknown
ISBISTER, Thomas (2)	Birsay	1815 (5-10)	labourer	unknown
ISBISTER, William	Stenness 1772	1791 -1802 (11)	canoeman	unknown
JOHNSON, David	Sandwick 1780	1801-1823 (22)	labourer	retired to RRS
JOHNSON, Hugh	Birsay 1773	1795 -1807, 1818-19 (14)	boatman	unknown
JOHNSTON, John	Orphir	1797-98 (5)	labourer	unknown

KIRKNESS, John	Harray	exp.1816(5-10)	labourer	unknown
KIRKNESS, Robert	Harray 1783	1809-1817 (12 years)	labourer	unknown
KNIGHT, James	Burray 1780	1805-1818 (18)	steersman	FREE inland 1823
LAUGHTON, Gilbert	Burray 1763	1783 -1800 (17)	canoe builder	HOME
LEASK, William	Stenness	1811, 1817 (10+)	labourer	retired to RRS
LEITH, James	Orkney 1795	exp. 1823 (5)	midman	unknown
LEITH, Nicholas	S. Ronaldsay 1769	1789 (5)	bowsman	unknown
LEITH, William Jr.	Orkney	1796-97 (5)	labourer	unknown
LEITH, Peter	Firth	exp. 1811 (5)	midman	unknown
LINKLATER, John Jr.	Harray 1774	1792 -1816 (24)	canoeman	unknown
LINKLATER, Robert	Birse	1789	labourer	unknown
LINKLATER, William	Stromness 1768	1783 -1802 (19)	inland master	unknown
LOUTIT, Thomas (1)	Harray 1783	1806-1818 (12)	labourer	unknown
LOUTITT (Louted) Thomas	Harray 1768	1793 (5)	canoeman	unknown
McKINLAY, William	Rousay	1816 (5)	midman	unknown

MERRYMAN, George	Harray	1816 (5)	labourer	unknown
MERRYMAN, John	Orkney, 1791	1818-1822 (4)	labourer	unknown
MERRYMAN, William	Harray	1816 (5)	labourer	unknown
OMAN, Mitchell	Stromness 1753	1771-1799 (28)	master	HOME
MOAR, John (1)	Birsay 1775	1799-1823(27)	boatman	retired to RRS
MOOR (Moar), John	Stromness 1762	1791	boatbuilder	HOME
MOAR, William	Orkney	1812-1814 (2)	labourer	HOME
MORROWICK, James	Harray 1778	1794 (5)	labourer	unknown
MORWICK, John	Rousay 1787	1807-1822	midman	HOME
MOWAT, Adam	Ronaldsay	1800	labourer	unknown
MOWAT, John	Burray 1766	1790 (5)	bowsman	unknown
MOWAT, John (another)	Ronaldsay 1772	1792	midman	unknown
MURE (Muer), Magnus	Orkney	1795-1798 (3)	labourer	sent HOME
MURRAY (Murry), James	Rousay 1764	1787 (5)	steersman	unknown
NORQUAY, Oman	S. Ronaldsay 1773	1791-1819 (28)	bowsman	retired to RRS

PAPLAY, John	Stenness 1775	1792-1797 (5)	bowsman.	Unknown
PARK, John	Burray 1768	1792-1822 (30)	occasional master	retired to RRS
PARK, William	Orkney	1796-1802 (6)	steersman	unknown
PATTERSON, Thomas	Kirkwall 1779	1801, 1816	bowsman	unknown
PRUDEN, Thomas	Kirkwall	exp.1813 (5)	bowsman	unknown
RENDALL, Peter	Westray	exp. 1816 (5)	fisherman	unknown
RENDALL, Robert	Orkney	1795-1801 (6)	labourer	unknown
RITCH (Rich) William	Burray 1761	1779-1796 (17)	steersman	unknown
ROBERTSON (Robinson), George	Orphir 1773	1791-1800 (9)	bowsman	unknown
ROBERTSON, James	Sandwick	1815 (5)	labourer	unknown
ROSS, George	Orkney 1797	1818-1838(20)	labourer	retired to RRS
ROSS, James	Burray 1775	1795 (5)	bowsman	unknown
ROSS, John first	Burray 1761	1790-1823 (33)	steersman	Free RRS
ROSSIE, Malcolm	S. Ronaldsay 1792	exp. 1817 (5)	labourer	unknown
ROSSIE, Murdoch	Burray	1812-1817 (5)	labourer	probably HOME
ROWLAND, Robert	Sandwick 1784	1801-1823 (22)	steersman	retired to RRS

ROWLAND, William	Birse, 1802	1820 (30+)	trader	settled in Edmonton
SANDERSON (Sandison) James	S. Ronaldsay, 1757	1779-1816 (27)	trader	retired to RRS
SEBESTON (Sabbeston), John	Walls 1759	1781-1798 (15)	labourer	unknown
SETTER (Seater), Andrew	Rousay 1779	1800-1823 (23)	steersman	retired to RRS
SINCLAIR, Malcolm 1 or 2 (?)	Ronaldsay	exp. 1813 (5)	boatman	unknown
SINCLAIR, William, first	Harray 1766	1782-1818 (36)	trader	died of dropsy at York 1818
SLATER, James	Kirkwall 1793	1809-1816 (8)	midman	unknown
SLATER, John	Orkney 1798	1818 (5)	midman	unknown
SPENCE, George	Birsay 1773	1791-1796 (5)	canoeman	unknown
SPENCE, Henry	Stenness 1773	1795 (5)	carpenter	unknown
SPENCE, James Sr.	Orphir 1778	1795-1818 (23)	tailor	retired to RRS
SPENCE, James (another)	Orkney	exp. 1824 (5)	labourer	unknown
SPENCE, John C.	Stromness 1798	1820-1861 (41)	boatbuilder	retired to B.C.
SPENCE, Joseph	Harray, 1772	1790-1823 (33)	trader	retired to RRS

SPENCE, Magnus Sr.	Birsay 1764	1783 -1821 (38)	linguist	retired to RRS
SPENCE, Nicholas	Stromness 1765	1793-1800 (7)	boatbuilder	unknown
SPENCE, Peter	Sandwick 1794	1811 (5)	midman	unknown
STANGER, William	Orkney	exp. 1816 (5)	labourer	unknown
STOKEN, William	Orkney 1800	exp. 1826 (5)	bowsman	unknown
TATE, James	Orphir 1759	1773 -1812 (39)	outpost master	HOME
TATE, John 2nd	Orkney	exp. 1813 (3)	labourer	unknown
TATE, John or TAIT)	Kirkwall 1777	1796 -1839 (42)	blacksmith	retired to Fort Vancouver
TATE, Magnus	Orphir 1769	1786 (20+)	steersman	HOME
TATE, William	Orphir 1770	1789-1812 (22)	bowsman	HOME
TAYLOR, James (1)	Stromness	1809-1812 (3)	tailor	unknown
TAYLOR, James (2)	Birsay 1794	1817-1826 (9)	Boatman	retired to RRS
TAYLOR, Thomas	S. Ronaldsay	1792 (5)	bowsman	unknown
TAYLOR, William	Birsay 1787	1804-1824 20+	trader	retired to RRS
TOMISON, Edward	Ronaldsay	exp. 1812 (5)	midman	unknown
TOMISON, William	Ronaldsay	exp. 1812 (5)	canoeman	unknown
TWAT, Robert	Orkney	exp. 1820 (5)	labourer	unknown

VALLIN (Wazlian), James	Stenness 1767	1797 (5)	cooper	unknown
WALLS, John	Orkney	1796-1801 (5)	labourer	unknown
WALTER(S), James	Firth 1772	1793 (5)	tailor	unknown
WHITEWAY, James	Burray 1778	1798 -1823 (25)	interpreter	retired to RRS
WILSON, Robert	Stromness 1800	1820 -1864 (44)	postmaster	retired at Oxford House
WORK, Magnus Sr.	Orkney	exp. 1820 (5)	labourer	unknown
YORSTON, Robert	St. Ola 1778	1795 (5)	canoeman	unknown

Sources: Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence 1795-1802

HBCA Biographical Sheets, Edmonton Accounts 1810-1829