

*Fort Albany where Woudbeu, Chief Captain among the 'Home' Cree, lived with some of his women for several years. From a water-colour by William Richards, whose grandfather re-established Henley House after the massacres.*

# The Henley House Massacres

By Charles A. Bishop

And wee the Said Council, do in behalf and in the Name of the Govr and Hudsons Bay Company And in justice to our unfortunate Country Men pronounce the Sentence of death upon Wappississ alias Woudbe the land Pirate. And his two Sons, Sheanapp and Young Snuff the Blanket, to be hanged, untill they are dead, dead, dead, for a terour to all the Savage Natives from ever being guilty of the like barbarity in future, Signed by the Chief officers and Men at Albany Fort, June 12th 1755.

THUS WAS THE DEATH SENTENCE pronounced upon three Indians for their part in the December 1754 murder of five Hudson's Bay Company traders at the Company's only inland establishment, Henley House. Yet, as unusual as the event is, a mere description of the murders and subsequent punishment of the culprits would be of historical curiosity only. The incident must be understood in the context of the fur trade, the Indians' view of this trade, and their relationship with Europeans at that time. Within these contexts, one

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socio-economic, the other perceptual, the event takes on new meaning and provides insights into the motives and policies of the HBC on the one hand, and into the attitudes of Indians about traders and other Indians on the other hand.

During the early decades of the eighteenth century, competition in the fur trade between French *coureurs-de-bois* from Quebec and English traders on James and Hudson Bays heightened as the former expanded their operations northward and westward of the Great Lakes thereby interrupting the flow of trade to the Bay. The intensity of rivalry fluctuated from year to year dependent upon such factors as the quality, quantity, and value of French goods as well as the proximity of the mobile French traders to the coastal English posts.

The year 1743 had marked a turning point in this rivalry. While the French for three decades had established camp trade with the upland Indians at locations inland from James Bay, that spring they began to intercept the Fort Albany home-guard Indians who for the first time 'Came downe all Clothed in french Cloth'. Indeed, the Indians warned that if the English did not

establish an inland settlement, the French would capture all of that inland trade in future. Although English items were cheaper, the easy access to French goods made them more attractive; Indians could avoid the long trip to Fort Albany and thus the frequent danger of their food supply becoming exhausted. Furthermore, the French made threats against Indians who traded with the English and spread rumours that the English posts were to be captured or destroyed. Despite all this, some Indians continued to send their furs to Fort Albany through Cree middlemen, while others continued to make the journey themselves. In order to retain the loyalty of these Indians and gain that of others, Joseph Isbister, Chief at Fort Albany, set out in June of 1743 'To build a house in order to Secure & preserve This Trade'.

William Isbister, brother of Joseph, took on the management of Henley House, the first inland settlement of the Company, until August 1751 when he was replaced by William Lamb. The precariousness of its situation is evidenced by the events which followed. Situated near the forks of the Albany and Kenogami Rivers, it controlled a strategic location. Indeed, the area was already identified by the Cree as 'Keesh a Matawan' - the meeting spot, the place where Indians converged en route to Fort Albany.

The first year it was a complete success. Not one French coat was worn by Indians arriving at Fort Albany. It even drew off Indians from the French posts at Michilimackinac and Nipigon, inciting Governor Beauharnois to write that Henley was to be destroyed if possible. Because of such threats, Henley was well fortified with palisades and gun ports so that it 'looks like a little Castle'. Although these threats never materialized, some Indians encouraged French traders to locate on the Albany River about 150 miles above Henley. The French again began to intercept the trade, threatening the new post and those Indians who, though in 'fear of being killed' for trading at Fort Albany, remained loyal to the English. Thus, during the first phase of its existence, Henley House was viewed as a frontier fort, existing primarily to inhibit the expansion of the French trade and to guarantee safe passage to Indians travelling to the main post, Fort Albany. It was, for the H B C, merely a way station, a place for Indians to rest and engage in minimal trade. The natives were encouraged to continue on to Albany where they could be better supplied. But the aims of the Company for Henley were increasingly frustrated since, as French supplies became more readily available, Indians grew more reluctant to continue on to Albany. The creation of yet another French post only sixty miles above Henley during the spring of 1754 again prevented most of the inland Indians from trading with the H B C. Six months later the Henley House traders were massacred.

The immediate response to this action is to argue that the massacre was the result of the English becoming



*The rivalry between companies for Indian trade is depicted in this drawing published in London in 1850.*

superfluous due to the easy access which Indians now had to French goods and their desire to please their new European trade partners by eliminating the hated rivals. This, however, is far too facile; the Indians were above all, desirous of keeping alive the competitive trade war of the French and English. In this way they could play off the traders against each other to their own economic advantage. How then to explain the murders?

The drama moves to its second act in March of 1755 when word reached Joseph Isbister at Fort Albany that Henley had been ransacked and the traders were missing. The Indians who reported the trouble thought that the French had incited natives to lure the traders out and kill them. This made sense since, according to Isbister, the French 'give a reward of the Value of five pounds to Indians for the Scalp of every English man they bring'. To prevent the post from being taken over by the French, Isbister paid Indians to go and burn the house, bury any remaining goods, and learn what they could about what had happened. Isbister considered the loss of Henley serious since now the French appeared to be in firm control of most of the inland trade. Despite French presence in the area, Indians as well felt the loss; several home guards had starved to death, being unable to acquire their necessary trade supplies.

Throughout April and May 1755, Isbister was unable to discover from Indian arrivals what had happened. An aura of secrecy, clouded by rumours of strange Indians

going about, prevailed until the Indian Woudbee arrived on 28 May. Woudbee for many years had been the 'home Captain' at Fort Albany. During this time he and 'Some of his Woman' were allowed permission to live inside the post on English foods while the post was managed by George Spence (1747-1753). While Woudbee grew demanding and impudent taking whatever food he pleased, Spence did nothing to control him. If somebody did check him, Woudbee would reply that the Englishmen 'keepeed there Woman, and the Victuals Was for them as Well as for us'. Access to the post had become a right, not merely a privilege to Woudbee and his relatives. Woudbee was also in the habit of robbing the upland Indians of their furs when they arrived at the post in order to pay his own debts, a practice which discouraged uplanders from visiting the fort. Thus, when Woudbee told Joseph Isbister that he found Henley House ransacked and a French Indian lurking about when he visited it in January, Isbister suspected Woudbee's tale because of his former bad behaviour. He kept him at the post by promising him a captain's coat while he questioned other Indians concerning Woudbee's story. The others remained silent, seeming to be afraid to tell what they knew, but hinting that 'home' Indians rather than French Indians had been involved.

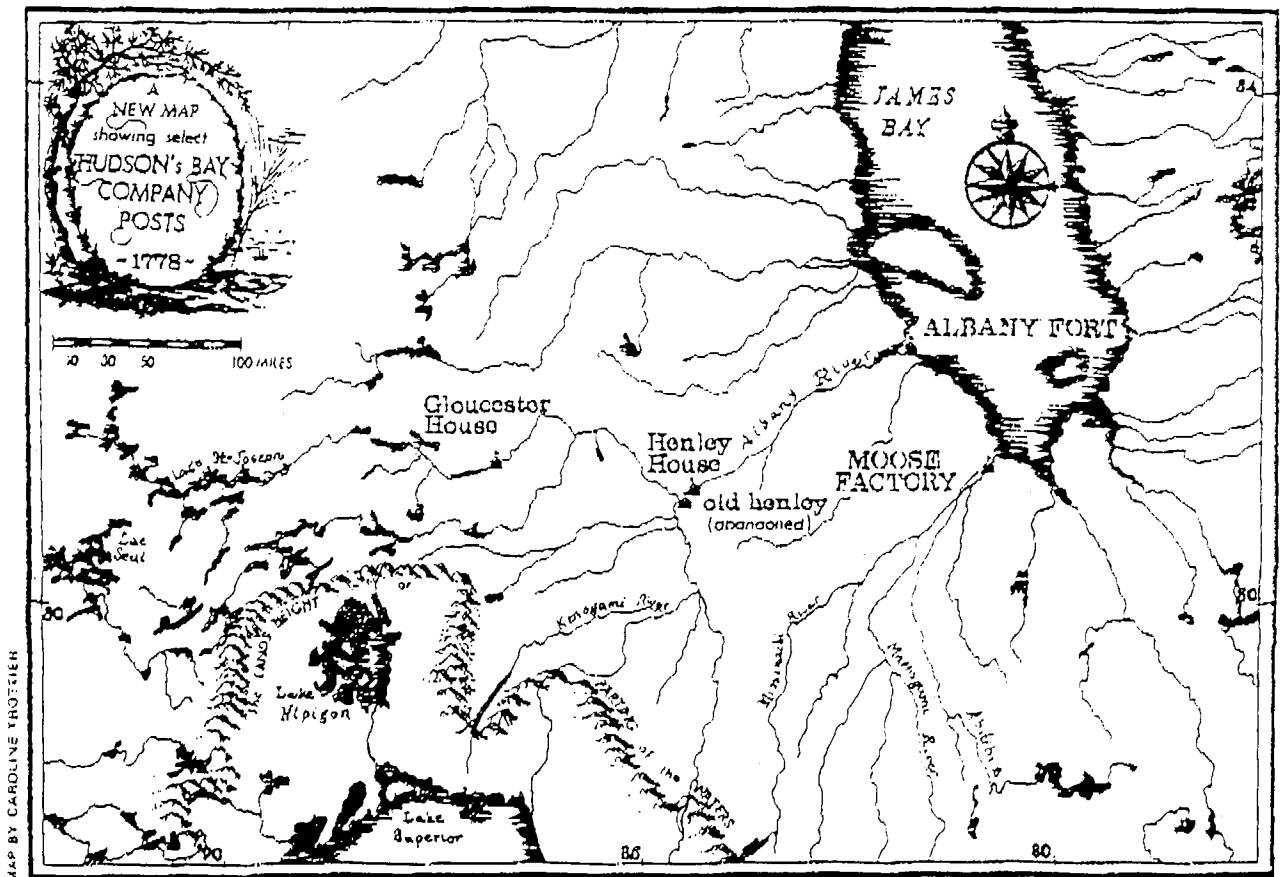
Finally, on 3 June an Indian woman named Mummy from the east side of Hudson Bay broke the silence. She reported that Woudbee, two of his sons, one of his

sons-in-law, and another Indian went with their families (fourteen in all) to Henley under the pretence of being starved. William Lamb, the manager, let them all in the house and gave them food and lodging, but the next day told Woudbee to build a tent outside the palisades. The Indians were ungered at having to leave and when Lamb sent his four servants to check marten traps and do other post duties, Woudbee and his son (Snuff the Blanket) grabbed Lamb, the son shooting him in the head. The four servants were then shot and all the bodies were weighted with stones and thrown in the river.

Woudbee remained at Henley as long as the trade goods held out, giving materials to other Indians as they arrived. When the goods were gone, he ransacked the house.

Mummy made Isbister promise never to divulge who told him this story, for her life would be in danger. Isbister concluded that her story was plausible.

The other Indians remained silent except for one distressed man, three of whose children had starved to death because of a lack of necessary trade goods. He confirmed Mummy's story, remarking that 'the Killing of ye people and robing the House was the Cause of his Distress & loss of his Children this last winter for which he Grieved Much & cried when he told me this story'. Other Indians blamed their hardships that winter on Eskimo witchcraft and threatened to go on an Eskimo hunt.





*The presence of Indian women enlivened the Christmas dance at York factory in the 1840s.*

servants were to retreat to the post. Furthermore, Lamb was not 'to admit a bove one Inden into your House nor suffer them to lye in it'. But Lamb apparently ignored these instructions and as late as October 1754 (two months before the massacre) was warned by George Rushworth 'by No means to keep no Woman In the Houso' to which Lamb replied 'ye Governour keeps two favorite Will not you Allow me to keep One'. Rushworth concluded that it was impossible to prevent the servants from keeping women at the post so long as the governor himself ignored the rule. Thus, the double standard continued at both posts despite Rushworth's warning and the formal instructions against such practices.

Lamb came to take two favourite women, one of whom (Nam a Shis) had been given to Woudbee's son (Shenap), and the other was Woudbee's own daughter (Won a Wogen) and wife to another Indian (Annisset). These women Lamb kept inside the post all winter eating the food which the other Englishmen should have received. When Woudbee and his kin arrived at Henley in December, it will be recalled, Lamb allowed them all inside the post but the following day ordered them to build a tent for themselves on the plantation. It was this order which seems to have triggered the murders. The situation was a repeat of the one at Fort Albany after

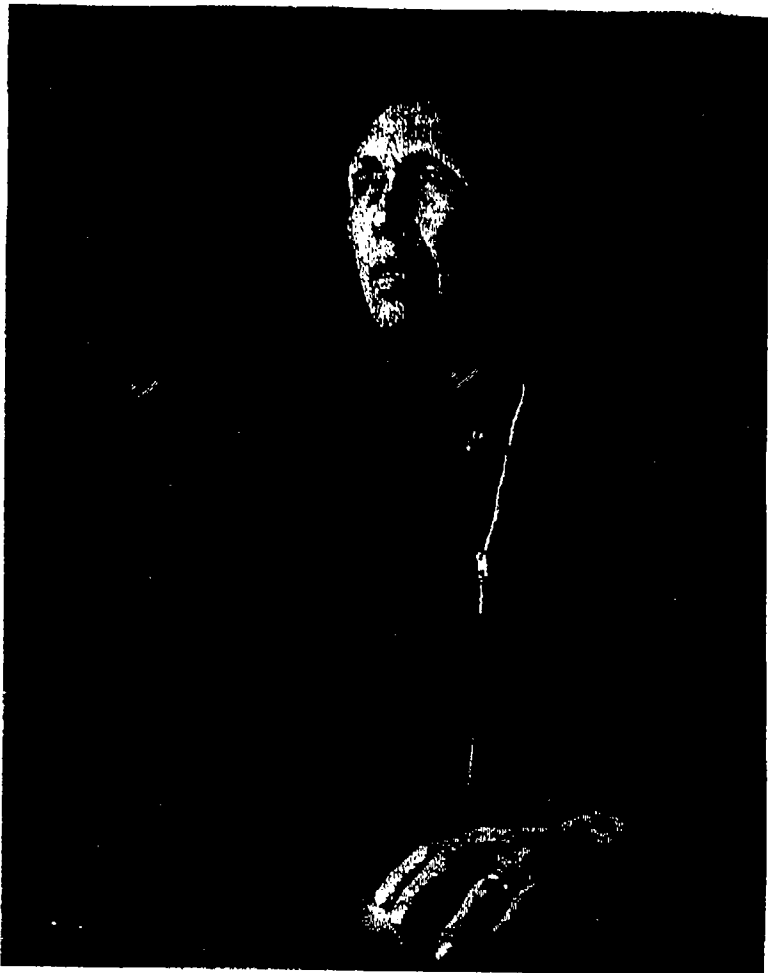
Isbister's return. The Indian women had been kept from the Indians all winter but now Woudbee and family were being expelled from the post. Once again Woudbee must have believed he was being demeaned and cheated. Thus, when Lamb foolishly dispersed the Company servants, the Indians took what they perceived was revenge for his behaviour.

In terms of economic theory, the more common relationship between Indians and fur traders involved the exchange of furs for trade goods and conforms to Sahlins' model of 'balanced reciprocity' — a willingness to give for that which is received. It was thus a type of social compact formalized at the trading post by speeches and pipe smoking. There were occasional instances where Indian captains offered their women to traders to cement the exchange relationship and create a sort of blood-brotherhood, as it were. Among the Cree themselves, according to the fur trader, Andrew Graham, this exchange of women created 'a reciprocal alliance and series of good offices . . . between the friends of both parties; each is ready to assist and protect the other'. Thus, the exchange of women involved morally sanctioned rights and obligations, not merely privileges. It is within this context that the behaviour of Woudbee must be interpreted. As Woudbee himself told the fur

The next morning Isbister was able to lure Woudbee and his two sons (Snuff the Blanket and Shenap) into the factory after which he locked the gates and had them seized. Upon realizing that Isbister knew the truth, they confessed their guilt, the noses of the two flushed sons gushing blood without violence. After refusing their request to tell them who informed him, Isbister put each in irons in three separated cells. He then went out and fired two shots, later telling each prisoner that the other two had been killed so that there was no reason to withhold information. The manner in which the information was obtained is given in a series of questions and answers reported for each prisoner in the presence of the other officers of the post. According to Isbister, the interrogation was conducted 'in their Own Tongue and Englished to the understanding of the Witnesses'. Their story differed only in minor details from that given by Mammy (for example, the bodies were hidden under wood in the forest rather than dumped in the river). The two brothers accused each other of shooting the manager, William Lamb. There was consensus, however, that their brother-in-law (Annusit or Amisot) and two upland Indians (Pothessis or Potha su and Assittaham) assisted in killing the four other Company employees while they were outside the palisades performing duties. The reason given by Woudbee and reported by Isbister for the murders was that Woudbee and his family were hungry. But when George Rushworth, an officer of the post, replied that Henley House had no food for Indians, Woudbee retorted 'You are a liar, the Victuals is as Much for the Indians as for the Englishmen.' The pretext of being hungry, Isbister later informed London, was a French plot. 'We are Confident that The French are at the bottom of this Villainous affair', since although the trade goods were stolen, the Indians left the post intact to allow the French to take possession of it.

As was earlier indicated, this was not the whole story, although it would appear that it was all that Joseph Isbister wished his superiors in London to know. A letter by George Rushworth, the surgeon at Albany, supplies the critical details.

Rushworth wrote that when Joseph Isbister returned to manage Fort Albany in the summer of 1753, he was not welcomed by the Indians in general. One reason may have been because he was less generous in giving out debts than Spence (who managed the post from 1747 to 1753) had been. Another reason may have been his curtailment of the permissiveness that had prevailed. Spence not only had allowed Indians access to the post, but he also permitted the servants to go 'over the Works in the Night' to sleep in the Indian tents. Rushworth warned Spence against allowing these practices fearing that the post would be robbed and the servants' throats cut, but Spence would reply that the Company did not care what went on so long as a good trade was obtained. Isbister's return ended all of this and Woudbee and family were expelled from the post for which action the



ROSEMARY GILLIAT

*A Cree woman, handsome and dignified in her advanced years.*

latter threatened Isbister's life. Yet there is evidence that Isbister himself was applying a double standard, as Rushworth comments: 'As for Mr Isbister Woman and young Girls I have no business With, as they are kept out of the Factory'.

How would Indians, and especially Woudbee, have reacted to Isbister's behaviour? Woudbee, as we have seen, was treated as the chief captain among the Fort Albany Cree. He apparently considered himself an equal to the traders and thereby had the same rights as they did, an opinion reinforced by Spence's permissiveness. But suddenly his access to post privileges had been terminated, an act which would have demeaned his status in the eyes of the other Indians. Yet Indian women continued to be exploited by the very person who had curtailed what he perceived to be his rights - rights guaranteed by virtue of his senior status and by the reciprocal bond between traders and Indians involving the exchange of sexual and domestic rights to his women in return for free access to post amenities. It is little wonder then that he threatened Isbister's life after he was evicted from the post. But how do these events relate to the Henley House massacre?

In 1751 George Rushworth issued a book of instructions to William Lamb concerning the manner in which Henley was to be managed. The Company men were to be on guard at all times and should Indians arrive, the

traders, when partaking freely of post foods: 'the Victuals was for them as Well as for ye Englishmen, as they keepe there Woman; they had a Right to these Victuals'. Woudbee could only tolerate his women being taken so long as the reciprocal bond, in this case involving the exchange of women for access to post amenities, was continued. The exchange bore the political burden of reconciliation despite the jealousies it must have aroused.

That the traders held quite a different view of their relationship with Indians is evident from their actions. Either they did not care what Indians thought about the domestic and sexual exploitation of women so long as the trade did not suffer; or they interpreted the behaviour of Indian women as being devoid of morals and thus keeping them at the post was not really exploitation; or they did not understand that the Cree viewed the exchange of women for post rights as a social compact. That is the Western view, which distinguishes an amoral economic sphere from a moral social one, lacking among the Cree, may have blinded the traders to the morality of the exchange relationship perceived by the Cree. Perhaps all of these reasons were involved in Isbister's and Lamb's expulsion of Woudbee's family from the posts. From Woudbee's point of view, on one hand this act ran counter to proper Cree etiquette, while on the other it struck him squarely in what seems to have been a somewhat inflated ego. The reciprocity had been terminated, his family had been cheated, and he had been degraded in the eyes of other Indians. Even in captivity, Woudbee's hatred for the English is evident. He told George Rushworth that Isbister would be killed 'and that the Indians Was going to take York fort and that Woman Was to let them into the Factory'. Thus, women who usually connote solidarity in exchange relations were employed by Woudbee as the vehicle of destruction.

A balanced picture of the situation surrounding the murders and subsequent reprisals must consider the attitudes of other Indians also. Those who were dependent upon the trading post and who were grateful for post assistance in times of need would not have shared Woudbee's rancour. Some, as we have seen, blamed him for their own misfortunes. Certainly the upland Indians who had had their furs confiscated by Woudbee must have felt no remorse. Those who had witnessed privileged treatment while at the post may have thought him an ingrate, or perhaps they were even jealous of his position. Still others may have been reluctant to oppose the traders' opinion of Woudbee lest they be punished, and indeed, Woudbee's relatives did avoid the post for some time. Whatever the case may be Woudbee and his two sons were hanged on 21 June 1755. When word reached London, Joseph Isbister was removed from his post for having taken justice into his own hands. His superiors feared that the hangings would prevent the upland Indians from visiting the post and thereby



*Of all Indian women, the Cree, as this young mother at Albany, were considered by Alexander Mackenzie to be the 'most comely'.*

diminish the trade.

Henley House was not re-established until 1759 but within a few weeks was attacked by about forty Indians. The manager was killed and the other servants fled at night on foot to Fort Albany. This time, however, Henley was destroyed not 'by too much freedom given on Account of the Indian Women, But Chiefly to get a Booty of Trading Goods'. The precedent set by the previous massacre demonstrated to the upland Indians that Henley House was not invincible despite its fortifications. The post was not re-settled again until 1766 due largely to a well-founded fear on the part of the Fort Albany servants of living inland. The degree to which the earlier events at Henley influenced the later reluctance on the part of the Hudson's Bay Company to settle inland is unknown. For a short period, however, the Company enjoyed good fortune. In 1759, the same year as the second attack upon Henley, Quebec fell to the English thus ending French trade and hence the competition for furs. A more formalized reciprocity characterized the relationship between Indian captains and traders during this period which was again interrupted by the re-entry of the Nor'Westers during the late 1760s. Thereafter the relationship between traders and Indians degenerated as antagonisms and reprisals, often duplicating Woudbee's case, grew more frequent. ♦