

# NICHE Reminiscences of a (Make-Believe) Mid- 19th Century Hudson's Bay Company Labourer

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This post is part of a limited series called HBC at 350, which focuses on the environmental history of the Hudson's Bay Company in light of the 350th anniversary of its founding in 1670.

I have two experiences with the Hudson's Bay Company, one real, one make-believe. As anyone who grew up in Winnipeg can tell you, the HBC is omnipresent. Like all Manitoba schoolchildren, I made regular school visits to the Manitoba Museum, the highlight of which was always the opportunity to explore the Nonsuch, the full-sized replica of the HBC's first trading ship. A trip downtown often included a visit to the HBC's flagship store at the corner of Portage Avenue and Memorial Boulevard,

and lunch with my grandparents at the Paddlewheel Restaurant on the top floor. My teens and early adulthood played witness to the long slow decline of the HBC presence in Winnipeg culminating in the closing of that same store just last month.

As a history undergraduate at the University of Winnipeg, I visited the HBC archives and was exposed to the work of Jennifer S.H. Brown, Edith Burley and others. But the truly formative moment in my understanding of the historical role of the HBC came through my experience working for two summers as a costumed historical interpreter at the Lower Fort Garry National Historic Site.

For two summers I played make-believe as an HBC labourer.

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I was part of a group of around thirty undergraduate students, supervised by permanent Parks Canada staff, who spent the summer leading tours and working as historical interpreters. We portrayed daily life at Lower Fort Garry at its heyday in the mid-19th century, when it was the centre of the HBC's presence in the Red River Settlement. We were hired through the Federal Student Work Experience Program. We were all majors in history and education and we were all attending university in Winnipeg or spending our summer there. And we were almost all settlers.

Like so much of the HBC presence in Winnipeg, Lower Fort Garry was in decline when I worked there during the summers of 1998 and 2000. The Chretien/Martin Federal budgets of the mid-1990s had had a major impact on Parks Canada and Lower Fort Garry, leading to cuts in summer staff and reduced opportunities for more active historical interpretation and for evolving understandings of Lower Fort Garry. This contributed to a general complacency and conservatism in how the history of Lower Fort Garry and the HBC was portrayed.

Conserving budgets and conserving staff led to more conservative storytelling. We were encouraged to focus on the HBC's place in the

nation building narrative underlying so much of the popular understanding of Canadian history. Through this lens, Lower Fort Garry was imagined as a site for the harmonious mixing of populations and cultures, a place where Indigenous and settler Canadians could live together in peace, forging a path to the multicultural Canadian ideal. Somewhat less central, though still important to this narrative, was Lower Fort Garry's role as the site of the signing of Treaty 1 in 1871 and the establishment of the generally successful, at least in the popular imagination, system of treaties between the Government of Canada and various First Nations.

Considering our interpretation of Lower Fort Garry took place in 1850, halfway between the Pemmican War of the early 19th century and the Red River Resistance in 1869-1870, it was somewhat surprising that there was very little discussion of the conflicts that had existed and continued to exist in Red River during the 19th century. There was little recognition of the Indigenous First Nations in Southern Manitoba, or the Métis, except in how they fit into local systems of governance and trade that served the purposes of the HBC. The history we interpreted had effectively been depoliticized in order to present a conventional, almost nostalgic, idea of the Red River Settlement. In a sense, by confining our historical interpretation to 1850 we were able to avoid discussing some of the most important moments in the history of Rupert's Land.



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African American scholars and activists have long understood that historical interpretation is fundamentally political.<sup>[1]</sup> Much of this activism has been about undermining the kinds of traditional narratives that centre the teaching of history and historical interpretation at most American historical sites. This teaching has traditionally emphasized a progressive understanding of American history, as well as an intense mythologization of colonial and revolutionary society. At the same time however, historical interpreters, particularly African American ones, have used historical interpretation as a site for activism and historical revisionism.

For example, Cheyney McKnight, an experienced historical interpreter and the founder of Not Your Momma's History, uses her historical interpretation business to provide interpretive services that foreground the experience of African Americans and the continuing injustices they face. Similarly, in recognition of the 2019 quadricentennial of the arrival of the

first enslaved Africans in America, performance artist Dread Scott staged a re-enactment of an 1811 slave revolt in Louisiana which featured 400 costumed interpreters marching on New Orleans. Historical interpretation is clearly political.

Unlike the activist understanding of historical interpretation that has taken on a leading role in American historic sites, Canadian historical sites are still very much interpreted in an uncomplicated and at times almost antiquarian way. Louisbourg, Canada's other major site of historical interpretation, is known for university students dressed as French colonial soldiers. Military installations, often likely to be the sites of historical interpretation because of the preservation of their all-stone structures, routinely emphasize Canada's colonial identity and ties to Europe in their interpretations.

At Lower Fort Garry our interpretation suggested a uniformity and conformity in the Canadian history we were presenting. Both summers I worked at Lower Fort Garry I portrayed young Orcadian men working multi-year contracts with the HBC. The first summer, I portrayed Patrick Gunn whose only mark on the historical record is that he was kicked in the head while trying to shoe a bullock at Lower Fort Garry and who overwintered there in 1848. I was tied to a specific person, with a recorded, though extremely spotty, history, and so I was confined to interpreting a standardized story. Rather than being able to create a personal history that might have included discontent or some form of

nascent class consciousness, I essentially portrayed a cutout, an idealized version of the young Orcadian HBC worker. A co-worker from one of those summers, Desmond Fitz-Gibbon, who is also now a historian, was inspired by Edith Burley's *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline and Conflict in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1770-1879*, and proposed that we interpreters should be able to portray worker discontent with company employment. While he was allowed to pursue this initiative, this kind of interpretation lacked institutional support and fell flat with most visitors. Patrick Gunn, and the other HBC workers we portrayed, then symbolized a loyalty to the company that reflected common ideas around the paternalistic relationship between the HBC and its workers.



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The second summer I worked there I was promoted to the role of Thomas Gardiner. Gardiner, who worked for the HBC in the mid-19th century, is much more visible in the historical record. He married a local woman, Nancy Fidler, who was a member of a local Red River Family, and a descendant of marriages between HBC workers and Indigenous women. Many of their descendants still live in local communities near Lower Fort Garry, which accounts for his more complete personal history. Thomas Gardiner and Nancy Fidler represented, in a sense, the preferred historical narrative at Lower Fort Garry: the marriage, both literally and figuratively, of Indigenous and settler, of the HBC with the local community, to create the fur trade culture that contributes to the Canadian



nation-building narrative.

Histories of class or race went largely unacknowledged except in the most anodyne ways. Other histories that complicated established narratives and subverted traditional understandings of HBC and Canadian history, often the work of local scholars, were largely absent from our historical interpretation.<sup>[2]</sup>

I think that there were two main reasons for the choice in narratives that dominated the interpretation of HBC history when I worked there. The first is that as a National Historic Site run by Parks Canada, policies and guidelines promoted nationalist histories of nation-building, of successful settler-indigenous relations, and of harmony and peace in the establishment of the Canadian presence in Western Canada. Secondly, Lower Fort Garry exists as a tourist site. It exists, and the historical interpreters are hired, to provide meaningful historical and educational experiences for the visitors who choose to visit every summer. Many of them have only a cursory understanding of Canadian history and often only visit for an hour or two. As a result, supervisors placed a premium on historical narratives that were familiar and useful in promoting a simple and agreeable national narrative that served to promote ideas of unity and progress in the Canadian context.



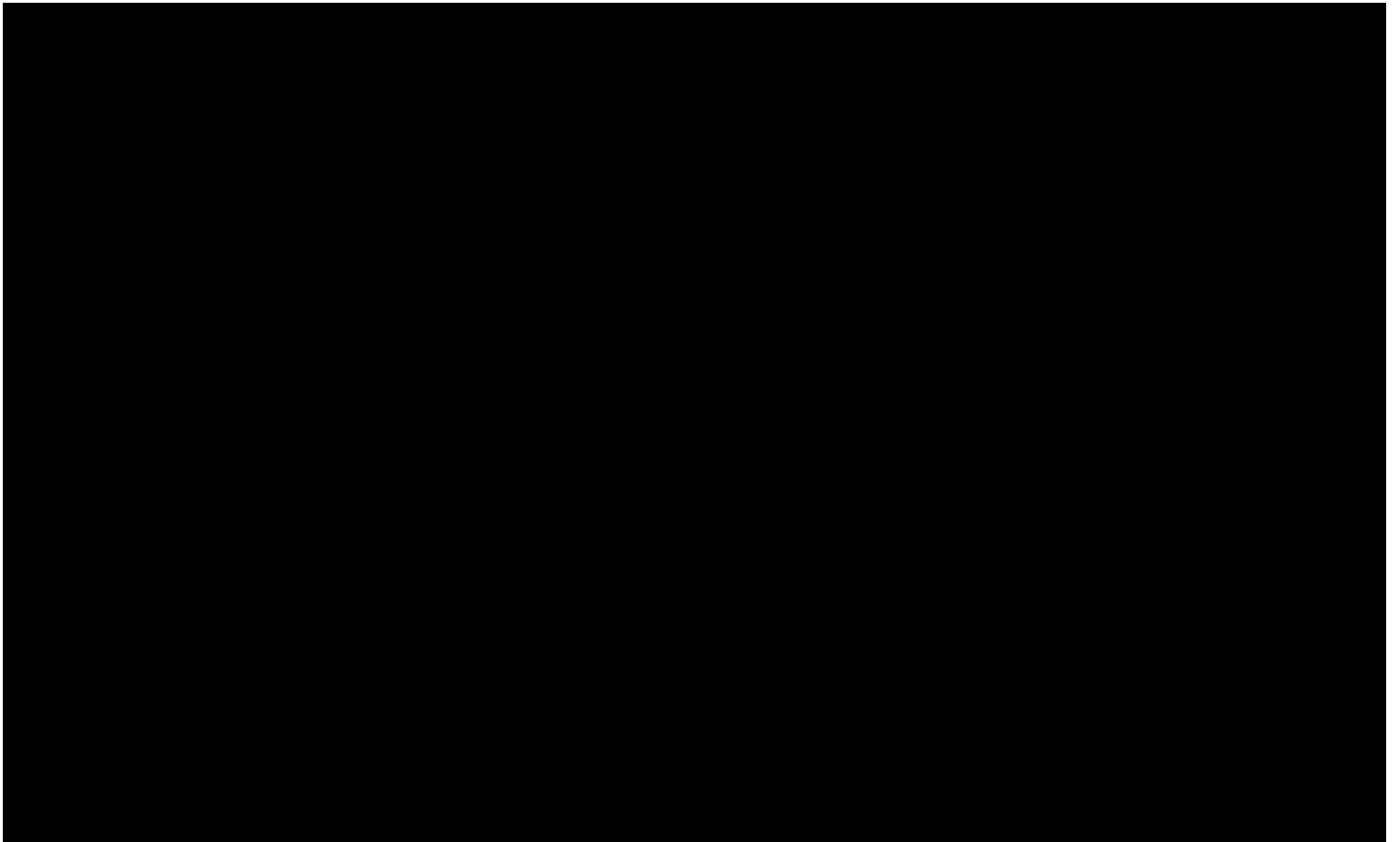
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I haven't visited Lower Fort Garry in over a decade. And in the 20 years since I worked there, the scholarship that exists on the history of the HBC, and on the fur trade society that grew up around it, has grown exponentially. Important new work by Erin Millions, Krista Barclay, Stacy Nation-Knapper, and others has transformed our understanding of gender, race and society in Rupert's Land.<sup>[3]</sup>

The most recent management plan for the site, published in 2018, suggests that this new scholarship is being incorporated into historical interpretation at Lower Fort Garry. The first of three key strategy recommendations, for example, is titled "Collaboration and expanded presentation of First Nation and Métis culture on site" and emphasizes the involvement of Treaty 1 First Nations and the Métis community in "management planning, decision making and programming." As Desmond Fitz-Gibbon reminded me, it's not as though these other narratives weren't

understood or discussed when we worked there, “but the pertinent fact is that only one of these intents ever really mattered, and that was the use of the fort as an HBC post.”

A case in point: the plaque commemorating Treaty 1 is located in the north-west corner of the fort, but none of the main walking paths for the site take a visitor by it. Rather there was a picnic table where staff would go to smoke. This problem was recognized at the time, and it seems that efforts have been made to correct the imbalance, but it still offers a very clear sense of the priorities for historical interpretation at Lower Fort Garry when I worked there.



The author would like to thank Desmond Fitz-Gibbon, Kevin Lopuck, Chris Young and Jeff Palmer.

Cover image: Lower Fort Garry National Historic Site (Parks Canada)

[1] A significant number of American historical sites, both publicly and privately run, portray pre-emancipation American history. These range from Monticello, the home of slave-owning President Thomas Jefferson to a myriad of Southern plantations where antebellum American society is often shown in a nostalgic light. These spaces have been and continue to be sites of conflict over popular understandings of pre-emancipation American history. These discussions have taken on even more meaning in the context of the New York Times' 1619 Project, an interactive series directed by Nikole Hannah-Jones commemorating the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in America in 1619, and even more so in light of the renewed strength of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd.

[2] The two books that I read after working at Lower Fort Garry that most affected the way I came to understand its history were Jennifer S.H. Brown's *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*, first published in 1980 and reissued in 1996, and Edith Burley's *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline and Conflict in the*

*Hudson's Bay Company, 1770-1879*, first published in 1997.

[3] See for example recent PhD theses by Krista Barclay, *“Far asunder there are those to whom my name is music’: Nineteenth Century Hudson’s Bay Company Families in the British Imperial World* (2019); Erin Millions, *“By Education and Conduct’: Educating Trans-Imperial Indigenous Fur-Trade Children in the Hudson’s Bay Company Territories and the British Empire, 1820s to 1870s”* (2018); and Stacy Nation-Knapper, *N-lkwkw-min: Remembering the Fur Trade in the Columbia River Plateau* (2015).

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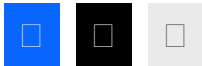
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