

# Unfair Masters and Rascally Servants? Labour Relations Among Bourgeois, Clerks and Voyageurs in the Montréal Fur Trade, 1780-1821

Carolyn Podruchny

Volume 43, 1999

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt43art02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Podruchny, C. (1999). Unfair Masters and Rascally Servants? Labour Relations Among Bourgeois, Clerks and Voyageurs in the Montréal Fur Trade, 1780-1821. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 43, 43-70.

Résumé de l'article

Le régime de travail associé au commerce de la fourrure de Montréal reposait sur la servitude, le paternalisme et l'hégémonie culturelle. Les journaliers canadiens-français devaient signer des contrats les obligeant à obéir à leurs maîtres qui, en retour, leur fournissaient nourriture et salaire. Ces contrats étaient en fait éclipsés par des « contrats sociaux » qui nécessitaient des négociations sans cesse renouvelées pour des conditions de travail raisonnables. Les voyageurs ne contestaient pas la hiérarchie des relations entre maître et servants, mais ils repoussaient continuellement les frontières de leurs droits en tant que travailleurs. Ils réussirent à diminuer l'autorité du maître par une campagne de résistance qui consistait à travailler lentement, à se plaindre et à voler des vivres et à désertre les compagnies.

# Unfair Masters and Rascally Servants? Labour Relations Among Bourgeois, Clerks and Voyageurs in the Montréal Fur Trade, 1780-1821

Carolyn Podruchny

THE HISTORY OF WORKING PEOPLES in the fur trade has recently become a subject of concentrated interest.<sup>1</sup> The publication of Edith Burley's *Servants of the Honourable Country*, which explores the master and servant relationship between Orkney workers and Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) officers stands as an important development in focussing attention squarely on the workers themselves, and demonstrates the extent of their power through insubordination and resistance.<sup>2</sup> A

<sup>1</sup>Some broader studies of labour and capital in early Canadian history briefly mention fur trade workers, such as H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co. 1981), 30-3; and Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart 1992), 35-6. European labourers first received significant examination by Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1980). Native labourers have been subject to some examination by Carol M. Judd, "Native Labour and Social Stratification in the Hudson's Bay Company's Northern Department, 1770-1870," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 17, 4 (November 1980) 305-14.

<sup>2</sup>Edith I. Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline, and Conflict in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1770-1879* (Toronto, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997); Philip Goldring first began to compile information on labourers in *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1900*, Volume I, Manuscript Report Series, no. 362, Parks Canada, (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services 1979). Also see Ron C. Bourgeault, "The Indian, the Métis and the Fur Trade: Class, Sexism and Racism in the Transition from 'Communism' to Capitalism," *Studies in Political Economy: A*

Carolyn Podruchny, "Unfair Masters and Rascally Servants? Labour Relations Between Bourgeois and Voyageurs in the Montréal Fur Trade, 1770-1820," *Labour/Le Travail*, 43 (Spring 1999), 43-70.

general pattern of master and servant relations existed among most fur trade companies and their labour forces which was similar to other 18th-century labour contexts. Servants signed a contract for several years, agreeing to be obedient and loyal to their master in exchange for food, shelter, and wages.<sup>3</sup> However, labour relations were highly influenced by local conditions. The personality of individual masters, the availability of food resources, the difficulty of work, and the cultural conventions of the labour force all affected the nature of the master-servant relationship. As many fur trade scholars have contended, there was never just one fur trade: it varied tremendously in different contexts.<sup>4</sup> The same can be said of labour relations in the fur trade. Process and flexibility were dominant characteristics in the relationships between masters and servants.

French Canadian *voyageurs*<sup>5</sup> working in various Montréal-based fur trade companies developed a distinct culture which emerged in the early 18th century and lasted to the mid-19th century. During the most active period of the Montréal trade, the labour force grew from 500 men in the 1780s, to over 2000 by the time the North West Company (NWC) merged with the HBC in 1821. As voyageurs travelled from their homes in Lower Canada to the Native interior, they underwent continuous transformations in identity and their culture came to be shaped by liminality.<sup>6</sup> Voyageur culture was also structured by masculinity. The cluster of values that permeated voyageur culture and became markers of the ideal man

---

*Socialist Review*, 12 (Fall 1983), 45-80 and Glen Makahonuk, "Wage-Labour in the Northwest Fur Trade Economy, 1760-1849," *Saskatchewan History*, 41 (Winter 1988), 1-17.

<sup>3</sup>For a brief report of master and servant law in a colonial setting see Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, "Master and Servant in England and the Empire: A Comparative Study," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 175-84.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay, 1600-1870* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 167.

<sup>5</sup>Louise Dechêne uses the term *voyageur* to identify the small-scale independent fur traders, working alone or in small groups, with some financial backing from merchants, from the late 17th century to the mid-18th century. Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montréal*, trans. Liana Vardi, (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1992), 94. Later, the term came to be used more widely to refer to contracted labourers, or *engagés*. I use the term *voyageur* interchangeably with *engagé*, servant, and worker.

<sup>6</sup>The term "liminal" is used by cultural anthropologists to mean interstitial, implying both margins and thresholds, and a transitional state. The concept was first suggested by Arnold van Gennep in his work *The rites of passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1909). The concept was further developed by Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94-5 and *Blazing the Trail: Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press 1992), 48-51. For a theoretical discussion and cross cultural comparisons of *communitas* or the development of community in liminal spaces see Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96-7, 125-30 and *Blazing the Trail*, 58-61.

included being tough, daring, risk-taking, hard-working, jovial, and carefree.<sup>7</sup> The voyageurs made direct links between their work and their gendered identity as men. This was a means in which to ground themselves in their passage out of French Canadian society as adolescents, and into the adult world of the exotic and dangerous *pays d'en haut* or "Indian country" where they had to become courageous and tough adventurers. Their masculine identity was influenced by their French Canadian peasant and Catholic upbringing, the Native peoples they met in the interior, and of course the hegemonic rule of their masters. Although many voyageurs became freemen (independently trading and living off the land<sup>8</sup>) and joined Native families or emerging métis communities<sup>9</sup>, their occupational culture remained distinct from these groups. Voyageur culture was also different from that of other labour forces, such as the Kahnawake Iroquois, and Orcadians. The men from these groups did not often work together, and language barriers prevented close communication.

As the fur trade in North America varied tremendously during its long history and expansive presence, it is not surprising that its paternalistic structure also varied tremendously.<sup>10</sup> Patterns between regions and among different companies changed over time. Fur trade historian Jennifer Brown contends that the managers of Montréal companies had greater difficulty in controlling their servants than did the HBC officers. The more fortunate HBC officers could rely on the London committee to lay down the standard rules of conduct which served as a basis for governing their men's behaviour. The Montréal companies not only lacked this central disciplining influence, but they also had further obstacles with which to contend. Discipline was not easy to administer while voyageurs traded *en derouine* (out on their own among Native peoples), or on long journeys requiring their support and assistance. Brown goes on to assert that not only were Montréal masters outnumbered by French Canadian voyageurs, but:

they also generally lacked the vertical social integration that helped to hold the Hudson's Bay men together. Differences of status, without the mitigating prospect of promotion, and of ethnic background meant that relations between the two groups were often characterized more by opposition, bargaining, and counter-bargaining, than by solidarity. In addition, the

<sup>7</sup>My understanding of masculinity as a category for historical analysis is informed by Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91, (December 1986), 1053-75 and R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1995), 67-92.

<sup>8</sup>John E. Foster, "Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis," *Prairie Forum*, 19, 1 (Spring 1994), 1-13.

<sup>9</sup>See Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press 1985) and Gerhard J. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Métis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1997).

<sup>10</sup>See Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 41-51.

French Canadians could draw on a long tradition of independent behaviour, social and sexual, in the Indian country.<sup>11</sup>

The particular form of paternalism in the post-Conquest Montréal fur trade was shaped by the high degree of control exercised by voyageurs in the labour system. Flexibility in contracts, frequent labour shortages, and continual re-postings gave the voyageurs bargaining power. Voyageurs' power was also augmented by isolation which increased their masters' dependence on them.

Burley challenges Brown's characterization of the HBC workforce as more rigidly controlled and less independent than the French Canadian voyageurs. She contends the Orcadians opposed and bargained with their masters like the voyageurs.<sup>12</sup> Although the culture of voyageurs was distinct from other fur trade labourers, all engaged in similar types of resistance and agency. These correlations are worth serious note, but the fractured nature of the sources prevents scholars from arguing convincingly that voyageurs were either more or less independent and 'rascally' than other fur trade labourers. The partners and clerks in the NWC did not keep detailed or consistent reports of their activities at fur trade posts, and they commented less on the behaviour of their men. It is thus difficult to compare quantitatively the extent to which voyageurs and other fur trade labourers resisted the rule of their masters. This paper instead focuses on the nature and patterns of voyageur and master relations, providing comparisons with other fur trade labourers where possible.

After the 1763 conquest of New France, the fur trade operating out of Montréal reorganized under the direction of Scottish, English, American, and a few French Canadian managers who called themselves *bourgeois*.<sup>13</sup> These companies, which eventually merged into the NWC, hired French Canadian men mainly from parishes around Montréal and Trois Rivières to transport goods and furs from Montréal to the North American interior during the summer months. They were also hired to work year-round at the company posts and handled trading with Native peoples. There is no question that the job of voyageurs was difficult. They performed near miraculous feats of transporting goods and furs over immense distances and undertook challenging canoe routes. Work at the interior posts was easier than that on the summer canoe brigades, but voyageurs were responsible for a tremendous range of duties, which included construction, artisan crafts, hunting, fishing, and trading. Threats to voyageurs' well-being, including starvation and physically debilitating overwork, came mostly from the harsh environment, but hostile Native peoples and cruel masters could contribute to the misery. Despite the harsh working

<sup>11</sup>Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 88.

<sup>12</sup>Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 15-16.

<sup>13</sup>The term "bourgeois" was used in 18th and 19th-century Canada to refer to the Montréal fur trade merchants and managers, which included company partners and all but the most junior clerks.

and living conditions, voyageurs developed a reputation as strong, capable, and cheerful, although sometimes unreliable, servants. The writings of the bourgeois and clerks working in the trade reveal a deep admiration for their skill and effectiveness as workers, and a tolerance for petty theft and minor insolence.<sup>14</sup> This article concerns itself with two questions: why did voyageurs put up with their tough lot without overt revolt, and what was the substance of the relationship between voyageurs and their masters? Because voyageurs were primarily non-literate and left little record of their experiences, we must rely on the writings of a diverse group of literate outsiders, including the powerful fur trade partners, lowly clerks, and assorted travellers to the north-west interior. A close and extensive examination reveals a complex network of accommodation and resistance in the master and servant relationship. This article maps out some patterns in the period from 1780 to 1821, which was the height of competition between trade companies and the expansion into the interior.

The Montréal fur trade labour system was organized around indentured servitude, paternalism, and cultural hegemony. The fur trade managers and clerks acted as paternal masters directing the labour of voyageurs. Voyageurs signed a legal contract, or *engagement*, which established the framework for the paternal relationship. The principal tenet of the contract dictated that servants obey their masters in exchange for board and wages. Voyageurs and their masters, however, interpreted the contract differently in particular contexts. Their diverging and situational "readings" of the legal contract led to the emergence of a "social contract" which constituted the actual working relationship between the two groups. The "social contract" was expressed in the customs which came to characterize the fur trade workplace and the dialogue between servants and masters over acceptable working conditions. Masters tried to enforce obedience, loyalty, and hard work among voyageurs, while the voyageurs struggled to ensure that their working conditions were fair and comfortable, and that masters fully met their paternal obligations. Voyageurs exercised relative cultural autonomy on the job, and often controlled the workpace and scope of their duties. Their masters, however, maintained ultimate authority by exercising their right to hire and fire voyageurs and by successfully profiting in the trade.

Although masters and servants can be understood as constituting two loose but distinct "classes" within the fur trade, it is important to be aware of the ranges within each class in terms of power, authority, and duty. Some masters were junior clerks, bound in a paternal relationship with senior clerks and partners. These clerks were paid a smaller annual salary than senior bourgeois, and did not hold shares in the partnerships which made up the Montréal fur trading companies. Partners were granted voting privileges in business meetings, in addition to their company shares

<sup>14</sup>For a representative example see W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada 1957), 197-98.

and higher salaries.<sup>15</sup> *Engagés* also had varying status. At the bottom were seasonally employed summer men, referred to as *mangeurs du lard*, or Porkeaters, who paddled between Montréal and the Great Lakes. Wintering *engagés*, or *hommes du nord*, who paddled canoes to and worked at the interior posts, scorned these greenhorns. Within the canoe, paddlers called middlemen or *milieu*, were subject to the authority of the foreman and steersman, or *devant* and *gouvernail*, who usually acted as canoe and brigade leaders. Some estimates suggest that these *bouts* could earn from one third to five times as much as paddlers.<sup>16</sup> Interpreters and guides, paid usually twice or three times as much as other *engagés*, also assumed more authority by their greater wealth and knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Although the ethnic divisions did not entirely follow occupational lines, the Montréal bourgeois became more and more British after the 1763 Conquest, while the voyageurs were primarily French Canadians. British discrimination against French Canadians, and fellow-feeling among voyageurs contributed to the social distance between masters and servants. Voyageurs lived within a different cultural ethos than that of the bourgeois, one which emphasized independence, strength, courage, and cultural adaptation rather than profit, obedience, and cultural supremacy. These different frames of reference distanced voyageurs from their masters, and frequently impeded harmonious workplace relations. Despite the range of roles within each group, the division between bourgeois and voyageur, or master and servant, served as a basic social organization of the fur trade.<sup>18</sup> Class, ethnic, and

<sup>15</sup>Toronto, Ontario Archives (hereafter OA), North West Company Collection (hereafter NWCC), MU 2199, Box 4, No. 1 (photostat of original), "An Account of the Athabasca Indians by a Partner of the North West Company, 1795," revised 4 May 1840 (Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company," by Roderick McKenzie, director of the North West Company. Original at McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB), Masson Collection (hereafter MC), C.18, Microfilm reel #22. Photostat can also be found at National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640); 51.

<sup>16</sup>George Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas, Containing a Description of the Picturesque Scenery on Some of the Rivers and Lakes; with an Account of the Productions, Commerce, and Inhabitants of those Provinces* (Philadelphia: M. Carey 1813), 254; and MRB, MC, C.27, Microfilm reel #13, Roderick McKenzie, Letters Inward [all the letters are from W. Ferdinand Wentzel, Forks, McKenzie River], 1807-1824, pp. 3, 23.

<sup>17</sup>"An Account of the Athabasca Indians by a Partner of the North West Company, 1795," pp. 51; and Alexander Mackenzie, Esq., "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West," *Voyages from Montréal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey 1801), 34.

<sup>18</sup>Brown, *Strangers in Blood* 35, 45-8. Also see E.P. Thompson's discussion of "patricians" and "plebs" in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press 1993), 16-17.

cultural differences operated in conjunction to create a paternalistic and hegemonic labour system.

Masters and servants accepted their positions as rulers and ruled. Voyageurs could challenge the substance and boundaries of their jobs and loyalty to their masters without contesting the fundamental power dynamics. Voyageurs' acceptance of their masters' domination was based on a deeply held belief in the legitimacy of paternalism. Voyageurs certainly became discontented, resisted their masters' authority, and sometimes revolted, but it was outside of their conception of the world to challenge the hegemonic culture.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the structure of cultural hegemony was not inconsistent with the presence of labour strife. Although voyageurs participated in the formulation of the master and servant relationship, they challenged the terms of their employment and contracts without fundamentally challenging their position in the power relationship. Voyageurs, clerks and bourgeois engaged in a dialogue of accommodation and confrontation as a means of constructing a workable relationship.<sup>20</sup> To assert the power and agency of the voyageurs does not deny the framework of subordination; rather it looks within it. Hegemony did not envelop the lives of the voyageurs and prevent them from defending their own modes of work, play, and rituals. Hegemony offered, in the words of E.P. Thompson, writing of the 18th-century English plebians, a "bare architecture of a structure of relations of domination and subordination, but within that architectural tracery many different scenes could be set and different dramas enacted."<sup>21</sup>

What "scenes of rule" were enacted in the north-west fur trade? The mutuality intrinsic to paternalism and hegemony governed social relations and made up the substance of the "social contract" between the bourgeois and voyageurs in the north west. Each party accepted their roles and responsibilities in the master and servant relationship, but they pressed the boundaries, and tried to shape the relationship to best suit their desires and needs. The difficulty masters encountered in enforcing authority, and the precariousness of survival meant they had to be particularly responsive to their servants. Part of hegemony involved appearances.<sup>22</sup> Masters often engaged in self-consciousness public theatre, while voyageurs offered their own form of counter-theatre. Through this means of communication masters and servants came to accept common ideas of the way things should work. The formula laid out in the labour contracts served as the crux from which both parties tried to digress. In the "social contract," or "ritual theatre," masters attempted to evade their provision of welfare, and the voyageurs tried to ease the strain of their work and to

<sup>19</sup>For a discussion on cultural hegemony and the consent of the masses to be ruled, see T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review*, 90 (June 1985), 567-593.

<sup>20</sup>Edith Burley also found that the relationship between masters and servants in the HBC was constantly subject to negotiation. Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 110-11.

<sup>21</sup>Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 85-6.

<sup>22</sup>This is suggested by Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 45-6.



control aspects of the workplace. A dialogue of resistance and accommodation kept the paternalistic relationship fluid and flexible, which was crucial to its resilience. Paternalistic hegemony was constantly being negotiated and, in the fur trade, management authority never came close to being absolute or ubiquitous.

Because the NWC and XY Company (the second most significant of the Montréal companies, hereafter XYC) were co-proprietorships, contracts were made in the names of the various firms or individuals comprising the shareholders and joint partnerships. No engagements were issued specifically in the name of the NWC or XYC, as all of the outfitting was carried out by shareholder partners and firms.<sup>23</sup> The labour contracts of all partnerships, both within and outside of the NWC, however, were remarkably similar. Contracts reveal voyageurs' names, parishes of origin, destinations in the north west, job positions, lengths of term, and salaries. The language of most contracts underscored the paternal nature of the relationship, requiring voyageurs to obey their masters, to work responsibly and carefully, to be honest and well-behaved, to aid the bourgeois in making a profit, and to remain in the service. For example, a contract form for the firm McTavish, McGillivrays & Co., and Pierre de Rocheblave, Ecuier clearly instructs the *engagé*:

to take good and proper care, while on routes, and to return to the said places, the merchandise, provisions, furs, utensils, and all the things necessary for the voyage; to serve, obey and to faithfully carry out all [orders] of the said Bourgeois, or all others who represent the Bourgeois, which are required by the present contract, he lawfully and honestly commands, to make his profit, avoid misfortune, warn him if you know of danger; and generally do all that a good and loyal servant must and is obliged to do, without doing any particular trading; do not leave or quit the said service, under the pain carried by the laws of this Province, and the loss of your wages.<sup>24</sup>

Masters were bound to pay the voyageurs' wages and provide them with equipment. The substance of the equipment, and the provision of food and welfare for the *engagé*, were rarely specified in contracts, and thus provided one of the few places for obvious negotiation between the masters and servants.<sup>25</sup> Custom came to dictate that equipment consisted of one blanket, one shirt, and one pair of trousers.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Lawrence M. Lande, *The Development of the Voyageur Contract (1686-1821)* (Montréal: McLennan Library, McGill University 1989), 41.

<sup>24</sup>Winnipeg, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (hereafter PAM), Fort William Collection (hereafter FWC), MG1 C1; fo. 33, contract form for McTavish, McGillivrays & Co. My translation.

<sup>25</sup>For examples see Joseph Defont's 1809 contract with the North West Company, PAM, FWC, MG1 C1, fo. 32-1 and the contract of Louis Santier of St. Eustache with Parker, Gerrard, Ogilvy, & Co. as a *milieu* to transport goods between Montréal and Michilimackinac, 21 Avril [sic] 1802, NAC, MG19 A51.

<sup>26</sup>Mackenzie, "A General History," 34.

In order to enforce the terms of the legal contracts, bourgeois tried to regulate their servants through legal and state sanctions. In January 1778, an official of the NWC sent a memorandum to Governor Guy Carleton asking him "that it be published before the Traders and their Servants that the latter must strictly conform to their agreements, which should absolutely be in writing or printed, and before witnesses if possible, as many disputes arise from want of order in this particular." The memorandum goes on to ask that men be held to pay their debts with money or service and that traders hiring men already engaged to another company should purchase their contracts.<sup>27</sup> Lower Canadian law eventually recognized the legality of notarial fur trade contracts, and a 1796 ordinance forbade *engagés* to transgress the terms or desert the service.<sup>28</sup> In Lower Canada, the legislature empowered Justices of the Peace (JPs) to create and oversee the rules and regulations for master and servant relations.<sup>29</sup>

Bourgeois on occasion turned to the law to enforce the terms of the contract. Voyageurs were charged with breaking contracts, mainly for deserting, rather than for insolence or disobedience.<sup>30</sup> The files of the Court of Quarter Sessions in the District of Montréal reveal a range of cases: voyageurs accepted wages from one employer while already working for another, they obtained advance wages without appearing for the job, and they deserted the service.<sup>31</sup> Cases of voyageur desertion and theft can also be found in the records of the Montréal civil court.<sup>32</sup> In 1803, the British government passed the Canada Jurisdiction Act by which criminal offenses committed in the "Indian territories" could be tried in Lower Canada, and the five

<sup>27</sup>NAC, Haldimand Papers, "Memorandum for Sir Guy Carleton," 20 January 1778, cited by Harold Adams Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1956, first published in 1930), 221.

<sup>28</sup>*Ordinances and Acts of Quebec and Lower Canada*, 36 George III, chpt. 10, 7 May 1796.

<sup>29</sup>Grace Laing Hogg and Gwen Shulman, "Wage Disputes and the Courts in Montreal, 1816-1835," in Donald Fyson, Colin M. Coates and Kathryn Harvey, eds., *Class, Gender and the Law in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Quebec: Sources and Perspectives* (Montréal: Montréal History Group, 1993), 129.

<sup>30</sup>For one example see Montréal, McCord Museum of Canadian History, North West Company Papers, M17607, M17614, Deposition of Basil Dubois, 21 June 1798, and Complaint of Samuel Gerrard, of the firm of Parker, Gerrard and Ogilvie against Basil Dubois.

<sup>31</sup>Montréal, Archives nationales de Québec, dépôt de Montréal (hereafter ANQM), Court of Quarter Sessions of the District of Montréal, TL32 S1 SS1, Robert Aird vs. Joseph Boucher, 1 April 1785, JP Pierre Foretier; Atkinson, Patterson vs. Jean-Baptiste Desloriers dit Laplante, 21 April 1798, JP Thomas Forsyth; and Angus Sharrest for McGillivray & Co. vs. Joseph Papin of St. Sulpice, 14 June 1810, JP J-M Mondelet. These cases were compiled by Don Fyson as part of a one in five sample of the whole series.

<sup>32</sup>ANQM, Cours des plaidoyers communs du district de Montréal (hereafter CPCM), Cour du samedi (matières civiles supérieures), TL16 S4 /00005, pp. 37, 27 mars 1784, JPs Hertelle De Rouville and Edward Southouse; and TL16 S4 /00002, no page numbers, 2 Avril 1778, JPs Hertelle De Rouville and Edward Southouse.

JPs named were all prominent fur trade bourgeois, although the court's power remained limited.<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to determine the effectiveness of court action to control workers, especially since prosecution rates have not survived in most of the records. Presumably the bourgeois would not continue to press charges if their efforts did not pay off. Yet pressing charges against voyageurs did not seem to deter them from continuing to desert, cheat contract terms, and steal from their employers.

Other efforts to control workers included cooperation between companies to limit contract-jumping and blacklisting deserters: In 1800 NWC officer William McGillivray wrote to Thomas Forsyth of Forsyth, Ogilvy and McKenzie:

I agree with you that protecting Deserters would be a dangerous Practice and very pernicious to the Trade and fully sensible of this when any Man belonging to People opposed to The North West Company have happened to come to our Forts, we have told the Master of such to come for them and that they should not be in any way wise prevented from taking them back.

McGillivray assured Forsyth that he was not protecting one of their deserters and had told his master to come and claim him. He went on to discuss the case of the NWC *engagé*, Poudriés, who was allowed to return to Montréal because of ill health on the understanding that he was to pay his debt in Montréal or return to the north west to serve out his time. McGillivray explained that when the NWC discovered that Poudriés engaged himself to Forsyth, Ogilvy & McKenzie they attempted to arrest him. McGillivray accused Forsyth of protecting him, and requested that he be returned to NWC service or that his debt be paid, continuing:

With regard to paying advances made to Men I wish to be explicit, we have alwise made it a practice and will continue so to do to pay every shilling that Men whom we hire may acknowledge to their former Master such Men being free on the Ground. We hire no Men who owe their Descent considering this a principle not to be deviated from in determining to adhere strictly to it we cannot allow others to treat us in a different manner- if a Man was Free at the Point au Chapeau we do not consider him at liberty to hire until he has gone to it.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup>The JPs were William McGillivray, Duncan McGillivray, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Roderick McKenzie, and John Ogilvy. Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, *The North West Company* (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada 1957), 136-7.

<sup>34</sup>NAC, North West Company Letterbook, 1798-1800 (hereafter NWCL), MG19 B1, vol. 1, pp. 131, William McGillivray to Thomas Forsyth, Esq., Grand Portage, 30 June 1800.

McGillivray decided to purchase voyageurs' engagements from their previous masters rather than paying their wages, and warned other fur trade companies against hiring any deserters.<sup>35</sup> The other fur trade companies soon followed suit.<sup>36</sup>

Voyageurs occasionally took their employing masters to court, most often to sue for wages.<sup>37</sup> Cases of this kind were widespread in all sorts of labour contracts in New France and Lower Canada, so it is not surprising that voyageurs followed suit. However, servants were not usually successful in claiming wages for jobs which they had deserted, or where they had disobeyed their masters.<sup>38</sup> The colonial government and legal system supported fur trade labour contracts, but the contracts were difficult to enforce because of the limits of the policing and justice systems in the north west. Masters thus relied more on the "social contract" which they were constantly negotiating with their servants.

Masters and voyageurs had different views of their "social contract," which frequently resulted in rocky negotiations. They agreed that servants were supposed to obey their masters' requirements to trade successfully in exchange for fair board and wages. Their divergent readings of "the deal" were based on different ideas of what was fair. Establishing a mutual understanding of obligations was easier if servants respected their masters. Servants respected those masters who they regarded as tough but evenhanded.

How did masters command and maintain their authority? In many historic circumstances, masters turned to physical might or the law as a principal vehicle for hegemony. But at the height of fur trade competition, the arm of the law was short and the high value of labour discouraged masters from physically intimidating their workers. Masters relied on paternalistic authority as an accepted ideology to justify and bolster their might. The ideology was expressed in the "theatre of daily rule."<sup>39</sup> Bourgeois and clerks imposed their authority believing that they were superior and were obliged to control their inferior servants. Masters also contributed to a dominant public discourse of their superiority, or enacted the "theatre of rule" in material ways. They ensured their access to more and better food, fancier

<sup>35</sup>NAC, NWCL, MG19 B1, vol. 1, pp. 152-3, William McGillivray to McTavish, Frobisher and Company, Grand Portage, 28 July 1800.

<sup>36</sup>NAC, Letterbook of Sir Alexander McKenzie and Company, kept by Daniel Sutherland (hereafter LAMC), pp. 40, D. Sutherland to Henry Harou, 15 May 1803.

<sup>37</sup>ANQM, CPCM, Cour du vendredi (matières civiles inférieurs), TL16 S3 /00001, pp. 41, 314-25, 3 juillet 1770 and 3 juillet 1778, JPs Hertelle De Rouville and Edward Southouse; and TL16 S3 /00008, no page numbers, 13 janvier 1786, JPs Hertelle De Rouville and Edward Southouse, 6 octobre 1786 (followed by several other entries later in the month), JPs John Fraser, Edward Southouse and Hertelle De Rouville, and 27 octobre 1786, JPs Edward Southouse and Hertelle De Rouville; and Eliot Coues, ed. *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry* (Minneapolis: Ross and Hains 1897), vol. 2, 860-1, Sunday, 27 March 1814.

<sup>38</sup>Hogg and Shulman, "Wage Disputes and the Courts in Montréal" 128, 132, 135-40, 141-3.

<sup>39</sup>Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 43, 45-6.

clothing, and better sleeping conditions than voyageurs.<sup>40</sup> Further in the interior, away from the larger fur trade administrative centres, bourgeois and clerks had to rely on inexpensive symbols and actions to enforce their authority. Carefully maintained social isolation, differential work roles, control over scarce resources, reputation, and ability all symbolized masters' authority.<sup>41</sup>

Differentiation in work roles was very apparent in travel. Bourgeois were usually passengers aboard canoes, and only helped their men paddle and portage in cases of extreme jeopardy. At times the rituals of travel situated bourgeois at the head of a great procession. In his reminiscences of a fur trading career, Alexander Ross described how the light canoe, used for transporting men and mail quickly through the interior, clearly positioned the bourgeois as a social superior:

The bourgeois is carried on board his canoe upon the back of some sturdy fellow generally appointed for this purpose. He seats himself on a convenient mattress, somewhat low in the centre of his canoe; his gun by his side, his little cherubs fondling around him, and his faithful spaniel lying at his feet. No sooner is he at his ease, than his pipe is presented by his attendant, and he then begins smoking, while his silken banner undulates over the stern of his painted vessel.<sup>42</sup>

HBC surveyor Philip Turnor, both envied and criticized that the NWC

give Men which never saw an Indian One Hundred Pounds pr Annum, his Feather Bed carried in the Canoe, his Tent which is exceedingly good, pitched for him, his Bed made and he and his girl carried in and out of the Canoe and when in the Canoe never touches a Paddle unless for his own pleasure all of these indulgences.<sup>43</sup>

At posts, bourgeois and clerks did not participate in the vigorous round of activities which kept the post functioning smoothly, such as constructing and maintaining houses, building furniture, sleighs and canoes, gathering firewood, hunting, and preparing food. Rather, these masters kept accounts, managed the wares and provisions, and initiated trade with Native peoples.

Bourgeois and clerks were encouraged to keep a distance from their labourers. Junior clerks in particular, whose authority in isolated wintering posts was threat-

<sup>40</sup>Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press 1997), 110-12.

<sup>41</sup>James Scott Hamilton, "Fur Trade Social Inequality and the Role of Non-Verbal Communication," Ph.D. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1990, 138, 261-3.

<sup>42</sup>Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West: A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains* (London: Smith, Elder and Co. 1855), 1: 301-2.

<sup>43</sup>J. B. Tyrrell, ed. *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor* (Toronto: Champlain Society 1934), Journal III, "A Journal of the most remarkable Transactions and Occurrences from York Fort to Cumberland House, and from said House to York Fort from 9th Sept 1778 to 15th Sept 1779 by Mr Philip Turnor," 15 July 1779, 252.

ened by experienced labourers, had to establish firm lines of control. When the NWC clerk George Gordon was still a novice, he received advice from a senior clerk, George Moffatt, to be independent, confident, very involved in the trade, and

Mixt. very seldom with the Men, rather retire within yourself. than make them your companions.- I do not wish to insinuate that you should be haughty- on the contrary- *affability with them at times, may get You esteme, while the observance of a proper distance, will command respect, and procure from them ready obedience to you orders.*<sup>44</sup>

In 1807, John McDonald of Garth was sent out as a novice to take over the NWC's Red River Department which was notorious for its corruption and difficult men. A French Canadian interpreter, who had long been in the district managing to secure great authority among voyageurs and Native peoples, had to be reminded by McDonald: "you are to act under me, you have no business to think, it is for me to do so and not for you, you are to obey."<sup>45</sup>

Probably the greatest challenges the bourgeois and clerks faced in asserting authority and controlling workers came from the circumstance of the fur trade itself— the great distances along fur trade routes and between posts, and the difficulties of transportation and communication. The arduous job of traversing an unfamiliar and inhospitable terrain led to frequent accidents. The incomplete nature of the sources obscure any measurement of mortality rates, but the writings of the bourgeois are filled with literally hundreds of cases of trading parties losing their way along routes, injuring themselves or perishing in canoeing accidents, being attacked by bears, and starving, to name a few of the mishaps.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup>OA, George Gordon Papers, MU 1146G, Moffatt, Fort William, to George Gordon, Monontagué, 25 July 1809. See also Hamilton, "Fur Trade Social Inequality," 135-6. Burley found a similar pattern in the HBC, Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 122-3.

<sup>45</sup>NAC, *Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815*, written in 1859, photostat, MG19 A17, pp. 119-21. The original can be found at MRB.MS 406, and a typescript can be found at the OA, MU 1763.

<sup>46</sup>For a few examples of becoming lost see MRB, MC, C.8, microfilm reel #14, Alexander McKenzie, *Journal of Great Bear Lake*, 18-26 June 1806, pp. 20; MRB, MC, *Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Rivière qu'Appelle, 1793-95*, Thursday, 13 March 1794 and Monday, 8 December 1794, pp. 11, 22; and OA, *Company of Temiscamingue*, Microfilm #MS65, Donald McKay, *Journal from January 1805 to June 1806*, Thursday, 12 September 1805, pp. 32 (I added page numbers). For examples of canoeing accidents see NAC, MC, MG19 C1, vol. 1, microfilm reel #C-15638, Charles Chaboillez, "*Journal for the Year 1797*," Wednesday, 16, 19 and 31 August 1797, pp. 4, 6; NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol: 4, Microfilm reel #C-15638, William McGillivray, "*Rat Rivèr Fort Near Rivière Malique...*," 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790 (written transcript precedes original on reel, both badly damaged), pp. 73-4; and NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 8, Microfilm reel #C-15638, W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "*A Journal kept at the Grand River, Winter 1804 & 1805*," 9 October 1804, pp. 9. On bear attacks see Toronto, Metropolitan Reference Library, Baldwin Room (hereafter MRL BR),

Masters and voyageurs dealt with the danger which infused the fur trade in a particular way. Both social groups idealized strength, toughness, and fortitude. Voyageurs competed with each other to perform awesome feats of dexterity and endurance.<sup>47</sup> They played rough and risk-taking games and tried to push themselves beyond their limits. In doing so, they tried to distract themselves from, and desensitize themselves to the risks inherent in fur trading and the deaths, accidents, and illnesses around them. Rather than being overwhelmed by the danger and tragedy, they made a virtue of necessity and flaunted their indifference. By incorporating manly violence and aggression into daily life, in their competitions and brawling, men could toughen themselves for the challenges of their jobs.<sup>48</sup> For example, in August of 1794, the Athabasca brigade raced the Fort George brigade from the south side to the north side of Lake Winnipeg. Duncan McGillivray, in charge of the Fort George crew, explained that

The Athabasca Men piqued themselves on a Superiority they were supposed to have over the other bands of the North for expeditions marching [canoeing], and ridiculed our men *a la facon du Nord* for pretending to dispute a point that universally decided in *their* favor.

---

S13, George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", describing the Lake Winnipeg district in 1812, written as a reminiscence, pp. 283-4; NAC, MG19 A17, Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, written in 1859 (photostat), pp. 54-5, 65-6; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Appendix B, *Public Archives Report for 1929*, pp. 109-45, (transcript from a copy at University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Collection, Pacific Coast Mss., Series C, No. 16; copy also at NAC, MG19 A9, Simon Fraser Collection, Vol. 4; originals at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Sunday 13 July 1806, pp. 143-4. On starvation see MRB, MC, C.24, Microfilm reel #2, Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800, Thursday, 19 February 1801, pp. 22; NAC, MG19 A14, Microfilm reel #M-130, John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6 (original at Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Saturday, 1 February 1806, pp. 20; and MRL BR, S13, George Nelson's Journal "No. 5," June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, pp. 209-10.

<sup>47</sup>Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 11 August 1800, pp. 30-1; MRL BR, S13, George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Tuesday, 9 July 1822; *ibid.*, Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Fort William to Cumberland House, 21 July - 22 August 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Monday, 19 August 1822; and Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West; A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co. 1855), II: 236-7.

<sup>48</sup>Elliot J. Gorn describes this pattern as well in "Gouge and Bite, Pull hair and Scratch: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review*, 90 (Feb. 1985), 18-43.

Despite the fact that the Fort George crew was more heavily loaded than the Athabasca crew, the two groups were evenly matched. They pressed on for 48 hours before agreeing to call a truce and set up camp on shore. Not surprisingly, McGillivray was delighted with their progress.<sup>49</sup> During a return trip to Montréal in 1815, John McDonald's crew of Canadians raced McGillivray's crew of Iroquois all day. The Canadians allowed the Iroquois to pull ahead at the start of the day, but they raced past them in the evening.<sup>50</sup>

Bourgeois encouraged the 'rugged' ethos of the voyageurs, which conveniently suited their agenda for quick, efficient, and profitable fur trade operations.<sup>51</sup> In some instances, bourgeois had to remind voyageurs of their manly pride in skill and endurance. During a particularly difficult journey, Alexander Mackenzie began to hear murmurs of discontent. The desire to turn back increased when one of the canoes was lost in a stretch of rapids. In order to encourage them to continue, Mackenzie

*brought to their recollection, that I did not deceive them, and that they were made acquainted with the difficulties and dangers they must expect to encounter, before they engaged to accompany me. I also urged the honour of conquering disasters, and the disgrace that would attend them on their return home, without having attained the object of the expedition. Nor did I fail to mention the courage and resolution which was the peculiar boast of the North men; and that I depended on them, at that moment, for the maintenance of their character.... my harangue produced the desired effect, and a very general assent appeared to go wherever I should lead the way.*<sup>52</sup>

Whether or not Mackenzie's "harangue produced the desired effect," it seems clear that both bourgeois and voyageurs valued the strength and courage required to paddle farther into the north west.

Accommodation among voyageurs, clerks and bourgeois made up part of the master and servant relationship. They worked closely for long periods of time, often shared living quarters, and faced many calamities and adventures together. As many disputes were caused by shortages of provisions, the surest way in which bourgeois and clerks could ensure loyalty was to provide plenty of good food for their men. Bourgeois and clerks fostered accommodation by meeting other paternal duties,

<sup>49</sup> Arthur S. Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-5* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited 1929), 11.

<sup>50</sup>NAC, Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 215.

<sup>51</sup>In a different case, Gunther Peck found that middle class commentators condemned miners' penchant for risk-taking in late 19th century Nevada. Gunther Peck, "Manly Gambles: The Politics of Risk on the Comstock Lode, 1860-1880," *Journal of Social History*, 26 (Summer 1993), 701-23.

<sup>52</sup>See entries Friday, 31 May 1793 and Thursday, 13 June 1793, Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montréal*, 285, 295-6, 322-6.



such as attempting to protect their men from dangers in the workplace, providing medicines, and treating men with respect. Masters also solidified their hegemony through generosity and kindness, reminiscent of a kind of feudal largesse. Extra rations of alcohol and food, known as *regales*, were provided on significant occasions, such as settling accounts and signing new engagements.<sup>53</sup> Routine "rewards," such as the customary provision of drams at portages, were also incorporated into the more tedious aspects of fur trade work.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes masters' generosity was self-interested. When McKay gave his men moose skin to make themselves shoes, mittens, and blankets to last them through the winter, he warned them that "we have a strong opposition to contend with this year" and that they must be ready to go at a moment's notice.<sup>55</sup> His gifts no doubt consolidated his authority, but they also helped the voyageurs to perform their duties more effectively.

Despite these points of accommodation, harmony in the workplace was continually under stress as voyageur resistance to master authority characterized labour relations in the fur trade. Voyageurs' discontents focused on such unsuitable working and living conditions as poor rations, or unreasonable demands by masters. Voyageurs turned to strategies such as complaining to their bourgeois and attempting to bargain for better working conditions to highlight their concerns and initiate change. Like the Orcadians working for the HBC, individual action was a more common form of worker resistance than was organized collective protest.<sup>56</sup>

Complaining by the voyageurs became a form of "counter-theatre," which contested bourgeois hegemonic prerogatives. Just as the bourgeois often asserted their hegemony in a theatrical style, especially with canoe processions, the voyageurs also asserted their presence by "a theatre of threat and sedition."<sup>57</sup> In one illuminating example in the summer of 1804, while trying to travel through low water and marshes, Duncan Cameron's men ceaselessly complained about the

<sup>53</sup>For examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, vol. 1, 10, 243, 23 July 1800 and 6 May 1804; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, 105, Sunday, 19 July 1807; and Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River* (New York: J. & J. Harper 1832), 304-5, 19 September 1817.

<sup>54</sup>For examples see NAC, MC, MG19 C1, vol. 1, microfilm reel #C-15638, pp. 3, Friday, 11 August 1797, Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 9, Microfilm reel # C-15638, pp. 16, Unidentified North West Company Wintering Partner, "Journal for 1805 & 6, Cross Lake," Sunday, 10 November 1805; MRB, MC, C. 1, microfilm reel #55, pp. 66, Duncan Cameron, "The Nipigon Country", with extracts from his journal in the Nipigon, 1804-5, (also found in the OA, photostat, MU 2198 Box 3, Item 3; and in triplicate typescript, MU 2200, Box 5 (a-c)); and Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montréal*, 325, Thursday, 13 June 1793.

<sup>55</sup>Approximately 20 June 1807, described in TMRL, BR, S13, pp. 186, George Nelson's Journal "No. 5," June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851.

<sup>56</sup>Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 118-20.

<sup>57</sup>E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 67.

miserable conditions and difficulty of the work. They cursed themselves as "Block-heads" for coming to "this Infernal Part of the Country", as they called it, damning the mud, damning the lack of clean water to quench their thirst, and damning the first person who chose that route. Cameron tried to be patient and cheerful with them, as he knew that complaining was their custom.<sup>58</sup> Voyageurs sometimes chose to limit the theatre of resistance to a small, and perhaps more effective scale by complaining to their bourgeois in private, so that they would not appear weak in front of the other men. During a difficult trip from Kaministiquia to Pembina, Alexander Henry the Younger commented that little or nothing was said during the day when the men had "a certain shame or bashfulness about complaining openly," but at night everyone came to complain about bad canoes, ineffective co-workers, and shortages of gum, wattap, and grease.<sup>59</sup> Often voyageurs restricted their complaining in front of their bourgeois to avoid losing favour. If they approached the bourgeois or clerk individually with strategic concerns, their demands were more likely to be met than if they openly abused their masters for unspecified grievances.<sup>60</sup>

When labour was scarce, men often bargained for better wages, both individually and in groups. In a large and organized show of resistance in the summer 1803, men at Kaministiquia refused to work unless they received a higher salary.<sup>61</sup> However, these types of group efforts to increase wages were more rare than the relatively common occurrence of men trying to individually bargain for better remuneration or conditions. Daniel Sutherland of the XYC instructed his recruiting agent in Montréal, St. Valur Mailloux, to refuse demands made by a couple of *engagés* for higher wages, and to appease the men with small presents. One *engagé* named Cartier caused turmoil by telling the XYC wintering partners that Mailloux was hiring men at significantly higher wages and by asking for his pay to be increased to that amount. Sutherland became angry with Mailloux, warning him "A[ways [offer more to] oarsman and steersman, but never exceed the price that I told you for going and coming [paid to the paddlers]."<sup>62</sup> Voyageurs could refuse to do tasks outside the normal range of their duties without extra pay as a means of

<sup>58</sup>Cameron, "The Nipigon Country," 38-39.

<sup>59</sup>Coues, ed. *New Light*, 1: 247-8, 28 July 1804.

<sup>60</sup>A blacksmith named Philip earned the wrath of his bourgeois, McKay, when he abused him both behind his back and to his face. Nelson, Journal "No. 5", 2 (labelled pp. 186). George Nelson felt pressured by the continual complaints made by his men about their rations. He worried that his men were spreading discontent among each other and preferred them to approach him directly with their concerns. Nelson, "A Daily Memoranda," pp. 8, Friday, 10 February 1815.

<sup>61</sup>Mentioned in Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 247, 1 July 1804.

<sup>62</sup>NAC, LAMC, 1802-9, vol. 1, MG19 A7, pp. 18-19, 25-26, D. Sutherland to Monsr. St. Valur Mailloux, Montréal, 10 November 1802, 29 November 1802, and 20 December 1802, (originals in the Seminaire de Quebec). My translation.

increasing their wages.<sup>63</sup> They also frequently demanded better working conditions. Most often their concerns centred on safety, and they could refuse to take unreasonable risks.<sup>64</sup> Men with valued skills and knowledge, such as interpreters and guides, were in the best position to bargain for better working conditions and more pay.<sup>65</sup> Because fur trade labour was frequently scarce, and the mortality rate was high, skilled men were valued. Masters often overlooked servant transgressions and met servant demands in an effort to maintain their services.

Voyageurs also attempted to deceive their masters by pretending to be ill, or by lying about resources and Native peoples in the area to evade work. It is difficult to judge the extent to which voyageurs tried to trick their masters, especially when they were successful. However, hints of this practice, and suspicions of bourgeois and clerks emerge frequently in fur trade journals, suggesting that the practice was widespread. In December 1818, stationed near the Dauphin River, George Nelson became frustrated with one of his men, Welles, who frequently sneaked in "holiday" time by travelling slowly or claiming to be lost.<sup>66</sup> Less suspecting bourgeois probably did not catch the "dirty tricks" more careful voyageurs played on them regularly. Some masters, however, questioned their men's dubious actions and sent out "spies" to ensure that voyageurs were working honestly.<sup>67</sup> Other deceptions were of a more serious nature. Alexander Mackenzie was suspicious that his interpreters were not telling prospective Native trading partners what Mackenzie intended, which could have serious repercussions for the trade.<sup>68</sup>

When efforts to deceive their masters were frustrated, voyageurs could become sullen and indolent, working slowly and ineffectively, and even openly defying bourgeois orders. In one case in the fall 1800, while trying to set out from Fort Chipewyan, James Porter had to threaten to seize the wages of a man who refused to embark. When the voyageur reluctantly complied he swore that the devil should

<sup>63</sup>For one example of men demanding their pay be doubled for extra duties see Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797," 49, Tuesday, 20 March 1798.

<sup>64</sup>MRB, MC, C.27, Microfilm reel #13, pp. 2, Athabasca Department, Great Slave Lake, W.F. Wentzel to Roderick McKenzie, Letters Inward, 1807-1824, 5 April 1819.

<sup>65</sup>NAC, MC, MG19 C1, vol. 3, microfilm reel # C-15638, pp. 8-15, François-Antoine Larocque, "Missouri Journal, Winter 1804-5"; and Nelson, "A Daily Memoranda," pp. 30-2, Saturday, 8 April 1815.

<sup>66</sup>See entries Monday, 2 November 1818, and from Tuesday, 1 December 1818 to Wednesday, 30 December 1818, OA, MU 842, pp. 10-11, 18-23, Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19.

<sup>67</sup>NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 15, Microfilm reel #C-15638, pp. 7, Fragment of a journal, attributed to W. Ferdinand Wentzel, kept during an expedition from 13 June to 20 August 1800, Friday, 26 June 1800.

<sup>68</sup>MRB, MC, C.8, microfilm reel #14, pp. 125, Alexander Mackenzie, Journal of Great Bear Lake, March 1806.

take him for submitting to the bourgeois.<sup>69</sup> More serious breaches of the master and servant contract included stealing provisions from cargo. Though Edward Umphreville kept up a constant watch over the merchandise in his canoes, a father and son managed to steal a nine gallon keg of mixed liquor.<sup>70</sup> George Nelson described the pilfering of provisions as routine.<sup>71</sup> Men also sometimes stole provisions to give extra food to their girlfriends or wives.<sup>72</sup> For the Orcadians working in the HBC service, Burley characterizes this type of counter-theatre—working *ineffectively* and deceiving masters—as both a neglect of duty and as an attempt to control the work process.<sup>73</sup> The same applies to the voyageurs.

One area of particular unease between voyageurs and masters was the issue of voyageurs freetrading with Native peoples. Unlike the HBC, the Montréal fur trading companies did not prohibit voyageurs from trading with Native peoples on the side to augment their income; some masters even expected them to do so as long as they did not abuse the privilege.<sup>74</sup> However, masters were often upset to find their men

<sup>69</sup>On trip from Athabasca to the McKenzie River, NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 6, Microfilm reel #C-15638, pp. 50, James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801, 29 September 1800. Porter quotes the man as saying "Si Je avoit Point des gages que le Diable ma aport si vous ma Soucier Embarker." See also John Thomson, who records that this man, named Bernier, gave further trouble to Porter on the trip. Thompson's interpretation of Bernier's swearing is "swearing the Devel myte take him if he had stirred a Step." See entries Monday, 29 September 1800 to Saturday, 4 September 1800, MRB, MC, C.26, Microfilm reel #15, pp. 1-2, John Thomson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1."

<sup>70</sup>OA, NWCC, MU 2199, pp. 8, photostat of original, Edward Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in Rivière Quinipique," June to July 1784, Wednesday, 23 June 1784. Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company," by Roderick McKenzie, director of the North West Company. Typescripts can be found also in the OA, NWCC, MU 2200, Box 5, Nos. 2 (a), (b), and (c). Photostats and typescripts can also be found in NAC, MC, Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640; the MRB, MC, C.17; and the MHS, P1571. For other examples of theft see MRB, MC, C.24, Microfilm reel #2, pp. 5, Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800, Friday, 28 November 1800; OA, Angus Mackintosh Papers; MU 1956, Box 4, pp. 2-3, Journal from Michilimackinac to Montréal via the French River, summer 1813. 16 July 1813; and NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 2, microfilm reel # C-15638, pp. 10, Michel Curot, "Journal, Folle Avoine, Riviere Jaune, Pour 1803 & 1804," Lundi, 11 octobre 1803.

<sup>71</sup>TMRL, BR, S13, pp. 9, George Nelson's Journal "No. 1," written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montréal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, (a typescript can also be found in the George Nelson Papers of the TMRL, BR).

<sup>72</sup>Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 25, 6 August 1800.

<sup>73</sup>Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 139-44.

<sup>74</sup>Mackenzie, "A General History," 34. On the HBC prohibition of private trading see Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 24-25. However, Burley suggests that the lack of reporting on this offense may indicate that the officers tacitly allowed their men to do so (144-52).

trading with Native peoples, because they wanted to concentrate the profit into their company's hands, and considered freetrading as "contrary to the established rules of the trade and the general practice among the natives."<sup>75</sup> In an 1803 trial over trading jurisdiction, John Charles Stuart, a NWC clerk, testified that when any men brought skins from the wintering grounds for the purpose of trading on their private account, "it was by a Special Favour" granted by their bourgeois, supported in the clause "Part de pactons" in their contracts. Although the practice was customary, the bourgeois retained the right to grant or refuse it.<sup>76</sup> After the 1804 merger of the XYC and NWC, the bourgeois decided to restrict private trade to increase profitability in the newly reformed company. Any man caught with more than two buffalo robes or two dressed skins, or one of each, would be fined 50 livres NW currency, and any employee caught trafficking with "petty traders or Montréal men" would forfeit his wages. The bourgeois were able to enforce this new restriction because the merger had created a surplus of men, so that employment became tenuous, and many voyageurs were concerned that their contracts would not be renewed.<sup>77</sup> In the minutes of the 1806 annual meeting, NWC partners agreed to ban men from bringing furs out of the interior in order to discourage petty trading.<sup>78</sup>

Voyageurs sometimes moved out of the "counter-theatre of daily resistance" to engage in "swift, direct action" against their masters' rule. Deserting the service was an outright breach of the master and servant contract.<sup>79</sup> Desertion should not be viewed as the single and straightforward phenomenon of voyageurs quitting their jobs. Rather, voyageurs deserted for a variety of purposes. Temporary desertions could provide a form of vacation, a ploy for renegotiating terms of employment, and a means of shopping for a better job. Men deserted when they were ill and needed time to recuperate.<sup>80</sup> Men also deserted when they thought their lives might be in danger, as was the case in March 1805, when servants of both the NWC and XYC ran off from the fishery at Lac La Pluie because they feared the Native people there wanted to kill them.<sup>81</sup> Voyageurs felt they could desert because they had a

<sup>75</sup> Described by Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 1: 159.

<sup>76</sup> MHS, GLNP, Folder 7, P791, pp. 2, NWC Letters, 1798-1816, Dominique Rousseau and Joseph Bailley v. Duncan McGillivray, (originals from the Judicial Archives of Montréal).

<sup>77</sup> Campbell, *The North West Company*, 155.

<sup>78</sup> Wallace, W. Stewart, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company* (Toronto: Champlain Society 1934), Minutes of the Meetings of the NWC at Grand Portage and Fort William, 1801-7, with Supplementary Agreements (originals in Montréal, Sulpician Library, Baby Collection), 216, 15 July 1806.

<sup>79</sup> For an example see MRB, MC, C. 7, microfilm reel #4, pp. 4, Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, (typescript copy in NAC, MC, MG 19 C 1, vol. 54, microfilm reel #C-15640), 5 December 1793 to 6 December 1793.

<sup>80</sup> McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, pp. 40, Saturday, 30 May 1801; and "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society 1965), 72, 1 June 1793.

<sup>81</sup> "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 233-34, Monday, 25 March 1805.

clear notion of their rights as workers which was instilled by the reciprocal obligations of paternalism. This may be one of the more significant differences between Orcadians working for the HBC and the voyageurs. Orcadians did not desert very often because of the lack of "desirable places to go." Orcadians would most often desert to NWC posts, while voyageurs more often became freemen, joined Native families, or returned to the St. Lawrence valley.<sup>82</sup>

As part of the continual negotiation of the master and servant "social contract," bourgeois and clerks responded to voyageurs' counter-theatre with intense performances of authority. They disciplined their men for transgressions of the master and servant contract, and sought to encourage voyageur obedience. Servant privileges, such as the provision of regales or sale of liquor might be curtailed or denied.<sup>83</sup> Bourgeois and clerks also frequently humiliated and intimidated their men. In one case during a journey to the Peace River in summer 1793, Alexander Mackenzie was confronted with a man who refused to embark in the canoe. He wrote:

This being the first example of absolute disobedience which had yet appeared during the course of our expedition, I should not have passed it over without taking some very severe means to prevent a repetition of it; but as he had the general character of a simple fellow, among his companions, and had been frightened out of what little sense he possessed, by our late dangers, I rather preferred to consider him as an object of ridicule and contempt for his pusillanimous behaviour; though, in fact, he was a very useful, active, and laborious man.<sup>84</sup>

6

He also confronted the chief canoe maker during the same trip about his laziness and bad attitude. Mackenzie described the man as mortified at being singled out.<sup>85</sup> This kind of ritualized public shaming reinforced masculine ideals of effectiveness and skill. On an expedition to the Missouri in 1805, one of Larocque's men wished to remain with Charles McKenzie's party. Larocque became angry and told the man his courage failed him like an old woman, which threw the man into a violent fit of anger.<sup>86</sup> On occasion, a voyageur could be whipped for delinquency,<sup>87</sup> and

<sup>82</sup>Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 153-4.

<sup>83</sup>For example, see McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 15, Friday, 2 January 1801.

<sup>84</sup>Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montréal*, 329, Saturday, 15 June 1793.

<sup>85</sup>*passim*, pp. 373-4, Saturday, 29 June 1793.

<sup>86</sup>MRB, MC, C.12, Microfilm reel #6, pp. 41, Charles McKenzie, "Some Account of the Missouri Indians in the years 1804, 5, 6 & 7," addressed to Roderick McKenzie, 1809. Photostat and typescript copies can be found in NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 59, Microfilm reel #C-15640 and OA, NWCC, MU2204, Vol. 3 and MU2200 Box 5 - 4 (a), and the account is published by W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, eds., *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818; The narratives of John Macdonell, David Thompson, François-Antoine Larocque, and Charles McKenzie* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1985).

<sup>87</sup>For one example see McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, Saturday, 22 November 1800.

## 64 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

bourgeois and clerks sometimes used the fear of starvation as a means of asserting authority over their men.<sup>88</sup>

In cases of severe dereliction, bourgeois could take the liberty of firing their employees.<sup>89</sup> In some cases, voyageurs were happy to be let go because they desired to become freemen. Nelson fired Joseph Constant, for example, for his "fits of ill humour without cause and Constant went on to become a prosperous independent trader."<sup>90</sup> However, it was a very serious matter when voyageurs decided to quit. Bourgeois and clerks made efforts to recoup deserters, and could punish them with confinement.<sup>91</sup>

The usual difficulties of the weather, accidents, and the constant challenge of the strenuous work could lead to high levels of stress and to anxieties among bourgeois, clerks, and voyageurs. Voyageurs' blunders, lost and broken equipment, and voyageur insolence often exacerbated tensions.<sup>92</sup> Alexander Henry the Younger grew frustrated with one of his men named Desmarrais for not protecting the buffalo he shot from wolves. He grumbled:

My servant is such a careless, indolent fellow that I cannot trust the storehouse to his care. I made to-day a complete overhaul, and found everything in the greatest confusion; I had no idea matters were so bad as I found them.... Like most of his countrymen, he is much more interested for himself than for his employer.<sup>93</sup>

On rare occasions violence punctuated the generalized tension of master-servant relations in the fur trade. Mutual resentments could lead to brawls between the masters and servants.<sup>94</sup>

More typically tensions in the master and servant relationship were expressed in nastiness and unfairness, rather than violence. Motivated by the desire to save money and gain the maximum benefit from their workers, bourgeois pushed their men to work hard, which could result in ill will. Most serious cases of ill will and injustice concerned bourgeois selling goods to voyageurs at inflated prices and encouraging voyageurs to go into debt as soon as they entered fur trade service. It is difficult to find many instances of "bad faith" in bourgeois writings, as they would

<sup>88</sup>Nelson, Journal No. 1, pp. 43, Saturday, 17 November 1809.

<sup>89</sup>Nelson, "A Daily Memoranda," 8, Friday, 10 February 1815; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries," pp. 235, Tuesday, 2 April 1805.

<sup>90</sup>TMRL, BR, S13, pp. 14-15, George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake," (notes made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Thursday, 10 May 1821. Constant had been threatening to desert the service for years, and he did make arrangements with another bourgeois, William Connolly, to leave the service. *ibid.*, Thursdays, 10 and 24 May 1821, pp. 14-15, 20.

<sup>91</sup>"The Diary of Hugh Farics," pp. 206, Sunday, 26 August 1804.

<sup>92</sup>Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 114, 9 October 1800.

<sup>93</sup>*passim*, pp. 99-100, 18-19 September 1800.

<sup>94</sup>Cox, *Adventures*, 166-7.

not likely dwell on their cruelty as masters, nor reveal their unfair tricks. However, travellers, critics of fur trade companies, and disgruntled employees provide clues. The French Duke de La Rouchefoucault Liancourt, travelling through North America in the late eighteenth century, commented that the NWC encouraged vice among their men by paying them in merchandise, especially luxuries and rum, so that none of them ever earned a decent wage.<sup>95</sup> Lord Selkirk, certainly no fan of the NWC, criticized the bourgeois further for exploiting their men, pointing out that *engagés* often left their French Canadian families in distress, and were unable to provide for them because the cost of goods in the interior was double or triple the price in Lower Canada, and men were usually paid in goods rather than cash. The NWC saved further costs on men's wages by encouraging addiction to alcohol, and then paying wages in rum at inflated prices. The Company placed no ceiling on its men's credit, so that many of them fell deeply into debt.<sup>96</sup>

Despite Selkirk's obvious bias against the NWC, he was not alone in his misgivings about Montréal fur trade company labour practices. As a new clerk in the XYC, George Nelson was instructed to provide any trade goods his men might ask for, and to encourage them to take up their wages in any of the trade goods on board the canoe. Nelson was initially uneasy with this mode of dealing,

for thought I what is there more unnatural, than to try to the get the wages a poor man for a few quarts of rum, some flour & sugar, a few half fathoms of tobacco, & but verly little Goods who comes to pass a few of his best years in this rascally & unnatural Country to try to get a little money so as to settle himself happily among the rest of his friends & relations.

Eventually Nelson came to justify his participation in this system of exploitation because he felt that the men would ruin themselves anyway, and that most of them were disobedient "blackguards" for whom slavery was too good.<sup>97</sup> Nelson was also surprised that these men could live such a carefree existence while deeply in debt and with few material possessions.<sup>98</sup> His comment reveals one of the deep cultural fissures between masters and servants.

Voyageur responses to the cruelty of bourgeois and clerks could reach intense heights in the ongoing counter-theatre of resistance. Ill will between servants and masters could impede work. Sometimes the tensions were so strong that voyageurs refused to share the fruits of their hunting and fishing with their masters.<sup>99</sup> The

<sup>95</sup> *Voyages dans l'Amerique par la Rouchefoucouuld Liancourt*, Vol. II, 225, Paris, An. 7.; cited by Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade in North America; with Observations Relative to the North-West Company of Montréal*, 2nd edition (London: James Ridgway 1816), 36-7.

<sup>96</sup> Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade*, 32-47.

<sup>97</sup> Nelson, Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, 1-2, 34, Friday, 15 July 1803.

<sup>98</sup> TMRL, BR, S13, pp. 7-9, George Nelson, Tête au Brochet, to his parents, 8 December 1811.

<sup>99</sup> Nelson, "A Daily Memoranda", pp. 17-18, 40-1, Thursday, 9 March 1815, Tuesday, 23 May 1815 and Wednesday, 24 May 1815.



more outrageous instances of masters abusing servants could lead to collective resistance among the voyageurs in the form of strikes or mass desertion. When a voyageur named Joseph Leveillé was condemned by the Montréal Quarter Sessions to the pillory for having accepted the wages of two rival fur-trading firms in 1794, a riot ensued. A group made up largely of voyageurs hurled the pillory into the St. Lawrence River and threatened to storm the prison. The prisoner was eventually released and no one was punished for the incident.<sup>100</sup> Voyageurs seemed to have developed a reputation for mob belligerence in Lower Canada. Attorney general Jonathan Sewell warned in a 1795 letter to Lieutenant Colonial Beckworth that officers in Lower Canada should be given greater discretionary power to counter the "riotous inclinations" of the people, especially of the "lawless band" of voyageurs.<sup>101</sup>

Instances of mass riots or collective resistance were not unknown in New France and Lower Canada. However, the small population, diffuse work settings, and not too unreasonable seigneurial dues usually restricted expressions of discontent to individual desertions or localized conflicts.<sup>102</sup> Yet, the instances of collective action could have created a precedent and memory for future mass protest.<sup>103</sup> On occasion voyageurs deserted en masse during cargo transports or exploration missions. In these cases men worked closely in large groups doing essentially the same difficult and dangerous tasks. Communication, the development of a common attitude to work, and camaraderie fostered a collective consciousness and encouraged collective action. In the summer of 1794 a Montréal brigade at Lac La Pluie attempted to strike for higher wages. Duncan McGillivray explained:

A few discontented persons in their Band, wishing to do as much mischief as possible assembled their companions together several times on the Voyage Outward & represented to them how much their Interest suffered by the passive obedience to the will of their masters, when their utility to the Company, might insure them not only of better treatment, but of any other conditions which they would prescribe with Spirit & Resolution.

<sup>100</sup>NAC, 'Civil Secretary's Letter Books, 1788-1829', RG7, G15C, vol. 2, CO42, vol. 100, Sheriff Edward Gray to Attorney General James Monk, 9 June 1794; J. Reid to same, 12 June 1794; T.A. Coffin to James McGill, 21 July 1794; cited by F. Murray Greenwood, *Legacies of Fear: Law and Politics in Quebec in the Era of the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1993), 80, 285.

<sup>101</sup>NAC, Jonathan Sewell Papers, MG23 GII10, Volume 9, pp. 4613-14, Jonathan Sewell to Lieutenant Colonel Beckworth, 28 July 1795. Donald Fyson brought this reference to my attention.

<sup>102</sup>Terence Crowley, "'Thunder Gusts': Popular Disturbances in Early French Canada," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers* (1979), 11-31; and Jean-Pierre Hardy et David-Thierry Ruddel, *Les Apprentis Artisans à Québec, 1660-1815* (Québec: Les Presses de L'Université du Québec 1977), 74-80.

<sup>103</sup>Jean-Pierre Wallot, *Un Québec qui Bougeait: trame socio-politique du Québec au tournant du XIXe siècle* (Montréal: Boréal 1973), 266-7.

When they arrived at Lac La Pluie the brigade demanded higher wages and threatened to return to Montréal without the cargo. The bourgeois initially prevailed upon a few of the men to abandon the strike. Soon after most of the men went back to work, and the ringleaders were sent to Montréal in disgrace.<sup>104</sup>

Efforts at collective action in the north west did not always end in failure. In his third expedition to the Missouri Country in fall 1805 and winter 1806, Charles McKenzie's crew of four men deserted. They had been lodged with Black Cat, a chief in a Mandan Village, who summoned McKenzie to his tent to inform McKenzie of their desertion. The men had traded away all of their property to Native people and intended to do the same with McKenzie's property, but Black Cat secured it. When McKenzie declared he would punish his men, Black Cat warned that the Native people would defend the voyageurs. When McKenzie tried to persuade the men to return to service, they would not yield.<sup>105</sup> Men who spent their winters in the *pays d'en haut* became a skilled and highly valued labour force and felt entitled to fair working conditions; they were not afraid to work together to pressure the bourgeois.<sup>106</sup>

Despite the occasions of mass actions, voyageurs more often acted individually than collectively. Their most powerful bargaining tool in labour relations was the option of desertion. The decision to desert could be caused by any number of poor working conditions, such as bad food, an unfair master, and difficult journeys. Voyageurs used desertion often as a means of improving their working conditions rather than quitting their jobs. Although bourgeois took voyageurs to court for deserting their contracts, the measure had little effect as voyageurs continued to desert anyway. The option to desert acted as a safety valve, relieving pressure from the master and servant relationship. If voyageurs were very unhappy with their master, they could leave to work for another company, return to Lower Canada, or become freemen. This safety valve worked against a collective voyageur consciousness. Collective action was also hindered because voyageurs valued independence.<sup>107</sup> They left farms where feudal relationships prevailed to enter into contracted servitude, but part of their pull to the north west may have been the promise of a more independent way of life than that on the Lower Canadian farm. Voyageurs idealized freemen and many chose this path, becoming independent hunters and petty traders, living primarily off the land with their Native families.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>104</sup>Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 6-7.

<sup>105</sup>Charles McKenzie, "Some Account of the Missouri Indians," 72, 77-8.

<sup>106</sup>MRB, MC, C.5, Microfilm reel #5, abridged version on Microfilm reel #6, pp. 75, 79, Alexander Henry the Younger, travels in the Red River Department, 1806, Saturday, 26 July 1806 and Thursday, 7 August 1806.

<sup>107</sup>Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West; A Narrative of Adventures in the Oregon and Rocky Mountains*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co. 1855), II: 236-237.

<sup>108</sup>Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room; S13; George Nelson, *Tête au Brochet*, to his parents, 8 December 1811; pp. 9-11; and Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, I: 291-93.

Some permanent deserters maintained a casual relationship with fur trading companies, serving the occasional limited contract, or selling furs and provisions. One man, Brunet, was forced to desert because his Native wife insisted on it. He rejoined the company under a freer contract. His wife began again to pressure him to desert the company and live with her Natives relatives.<sup>109</sup> Another man named Vivier decided to quit his contract in November 1798 because he could not stand living with Native people, as he was ordered to do by his bourgeois, John Thomson:

he says that he cannot live any longer with them & that all the devils in Hell cannot make him return, & that he prefers marching all Winter from one Fort to another rather than Live any Longer with them.

Thomson refused to give him provisions or equipment because in the fall he had provided him with enough to pass the winter. Thomson was frustrated with his behaviour all season, as he had refused to return to the fort when ordered. Vivier had become so disenchanted with the trade that he offered his wife and child to another voyageur, so he could return to Lower Canada, but his wife protested. Thomson finally agreed to provide him with ammunition, tobacco and an axe on credit, and Vivier left the post. It is unclear whether he remained with his Native family. A month and a half later Vivier returned to the post, and appeared to take up work again.<sup>110</sup> Voyageurs may have returned to work for fur trade companies because they could not find enough to eat, or desired the protection that a post provided. Fear of starvation and the dangers of the north west may have discouraged voyageurs from deserting in the first place. In one case, Alexander Henry the Younger came across a pond where André Garreau, a NWC deserter, had been killed in 1801 with five Mandans by a Swiss party.<sup>111</sup>

Although it is difficult to quantify the occurrence of turbulence and accommodation in the relations between masters and servants, negotiations over acceptable labour conditions dominated the north-west fur trade. Masters controlled the workforce by ensuring that all men immediately became indebted to their company, and by being the sole providers of European goods in the interior. Masters also capitalized on the risk-taking and tough masculine ethos to encourage a profitable work pace. However, their best way to maintain order was to impress their men with their personal authority which was garnered by a strong manner, bravery, and effectiveness. Formal symbols, such as dress, ritual celebrations, access to better provisions, and a lighter work load reminded voyageurs of the superior status and power of their bourgeois. This "theatre of daily rule" helped to lay out the substance

<sup>109</sup>Nelson, Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, pp. 22-3, Monday, 31 January 1804, Monday, 14 February 1804, Tuesday, 15 February 1804, and Thursday 17 February 1804.

<sup>110</sup>NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 7, Microfilm reel #C-15638, pp. 19-24, John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798," Sunday, 18 November 1798, Monday, 19 November 1798, Tuesday, 20 November 1798, and Friday, 4 January 1799.

<sup>111</sup>Henry, Travels in the Red River Department, pp. 50, Wednesday, 23 July 1806.

of the hegemonic structure of paternal authority. Masters also turned to the courts to prosecute their men for breaches of contract, and attempted to cooperate with other companies to regulate the workforce, but these methods were far from successful in controlling their voyageurs. The "social contract" overshadowed the legal contract between masters and servants, establishing an effective working relationship that was key to ensuring a well-functioning trade and high profits.

In turn, voyageurs asserted their cultural autonomy and resisted master authority. Their "counter-theatre" shaped the working environment. Voyageurs generally had very high performance standards for work, which were bolstered by masculine ideals of strength, endurance, and risk-taking. Nonetheless, voyageurs created a space to continually challenge the expectations of their masters, in part through their complaining. They also set their own pace, demanded adequate and even generous diets, refused to work in bad weather, and frequently worked to rule. When masters made unreasonable demands or failed to provide adequate provisions, voyageurs responded by working more slowly, becoming insolent, and occasionally freetrading and stealing provisions. More extreme expressions of discontent included turning to the Lower Canadian courts for justice, but, like the bourgeois and clerks, voyageurs found that their demands were better met by challenging the social, rather than the legal, contract. Their strongest bargaining tool proved to be deserting the service, which they sometimes did *en masse*. Overall, voyageurs acted more individually than collectively, as the option to desert the service acted more as a safety valve against the development of a collective voyageur consciousness.

The master and servant relationship was thus a fragile balance, constantly being negotiated. Ruling-class domination was an on-going process where the degree of legitimation was always uneven and the creation of counterhegemonies remained a live option. E.P. Thompson's emphasis on theatre and the symbolic expression of hegemony ring true for the voyageurs and bourgeois, whose power struggles were as often about respect and authority as about decent wages and provisions.<sup>112</sup> The difficult working conditions, regular fear of starvation, and absence of a police force positioned labour mediation in the forefront of the trade and strengthened the symbolic power of the "theatre of daily rule." The "social contract" between the masters and servants overshadowed their legal contract, and determined the day-to-day relations between the two groups. Frequently, accommodation allowed the fur trade to run smoothly, and voyageurs and bosses cooperated, especially in the face of external threats. Yet just as often, labour disputes and power struggles characterized the trade.

<sup>112</sup>Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 74-5.

*I wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, and the History Department at the University of Toronto for financial assistance during the research and writing of this article. I would also like to thank Allan Greer, Ian Radforth, Sylvia Van Kirk, Catherine Carstairs, and Eva Plach for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.*

33  
**PARDEVANT** les Témoins, soussignés ; fut présent

lequel s'est volontairement engagé et s'engage par ces présentes à MESSRS. WILLIAM M'GILLIVRAY, SIMON M'GILLIVRAY, ARCHIBALD NORMAN M'LEOD, THOMAS THAIN, et HENRY MACKENZIE, de Montréal, Négocians et Associés, sous le nom de M'TAVISH, M'GILLIVRAYS & Co. et PIERRE DE ROCHEBLAVE, Ecuier, à ce present et acceptant pour hiverner pendant l'espace de

en qualité de

avoir bien et duement soin, pendant les routes, et étant rendu aux dits lieux, des Marchandises, Vivres, Pelleteries, Ustensiles, et de toutes les choses nécessaires pour le voyage ; servir, obéir, et exécuter fidèlement tout ce que les dits Sieurs Bourgeois, ou tout autre représentant leurs personnes, auxquels ils pourraient transporter le présent engagement, lui commanderont de licite et honnête, faire leur profit, éviter leur dommage, les en avertir s'il vient à sa connaissance ; et généralement tout ce qu'un bon et fidèle engagé doit et est obligé de faire, sans pouvoir faire aucune traite particulière ; s'absenter ni quitter le dit service, sous les peines portées par les loix de cette Province, et de perdre ses gages. Cet engagement ainsi fait pour et moyennant la somme de

argent de Grand Portage,

avec un équipement,

qu'ils promettent et s'obligent de bailler et payer au dit engagé, un mois après son retour à Montréal, où le présent engagement finira, au bout des dits années. Car Ainsi, &c. Promettant, &c. Obligéant, &c. Renonçant, &c. FAIT ET PASSE' à

et ont signé à l'exception du dit engagé, qui ayant déclaré ne le savoir faire, de ce enquis, a fait sa marque ordinaire, après lecture faite.

*"Engagement or contract signed by servants entering into service for fur trade partnership McTavish, McGillivrays & Co. and Pierre de Rocheblave." Winnipeg, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Fort William Collection, MG1 C1/33.*