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# Strangers In Blood: Fur Trade Company Families In Indian Country



## Synopsis

For two centuries (1670-1870), English, Scottish, and Canadian fur traders voyaged the myriad waterways of Rupert's Land, the vast territory chartered to the Hudson's Bay Company and later splintered among five Canadian provinces and four American states. The knowledge and support of northern Native peoples were critical to the newcomer's survival and success. With acquaintance and alliance came intermarriage, and the unions of European traders and Native women generated thousands of descendants. Jennifer Brown's *Strangers in Blood* is the first work to look systematically at these parents and their children. Brown focuses on Hudson's Bay Company officers and North West Company wintering partners and clerks—those whose relationships are best known from post journals, correspondence, accounts, and wills. The durability of such families varied greatly. Settlers, missionaries, European women, and sometimes the courts challenged fur trade marriages. Some officers' Scottish and Canadian relatives dismissed Native wives and "Indian" progeny as illegitimate. Traders who took these ties seriously were obliged to defend them, to leave wills recognizing their wives and children, and to secure their legal and social status—to prove that they were kin, not "strangers in blood." Brown illustrates that the lives and identities of these children were shaped by factors far more complex than "blood." Sons and daughters diverged along paths affected by gender. Some descendants became Métis and espoused Métis nationhood under Louis Riel. Others rejected or were never offered that course—they passed into white or Indian communities or, in some instances, identified themselves (without prejudice) as "half breeds." The fur trade did not coalesce into a single society. Rather, like Rupert's Land, it splintered, and the historical consequences have been with us ever since.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book has a high "fog factor" and is difficult to read. It uses academic jargon and long sentences. The structure is complex and confusing. That is not to say that the book is inconsequential; indeed, the subject matter is quite important. It is simply difficult to access it through this book. The back cover accurately describes the book as looking systematically at the families and offspring of the upper echelon of the Hudson Bay Company and the North West Company. Unfortunately, this was a male-dominated business and a male-dominated period in history. Men kept the written records. The author of "Strangers in Blood" relies heavily on anecdotal accounts of individuals, complete with many direct quotes. Thus, this is a book that follows the men of the fur trade. Their wives and offspring become adjuncts. The book partially compensates for this by providing information on societal pressures within the fur trade, as well as in Canada and England at the time. It also addresses the policies of the fur companies relative to dependents. The book characterizes and contrasts family connections in the Hudson Bay Company and the Northwest Company. The presentation is roughly chronological from the late 1700 to the mid 1800s. The 1821 merger of the two companies is a focal point. Chapters and subchapters move back and forth between the two companies; as well as between various topics of gender and types of family relationships. The focus is on individuals, with every page containing a confusing array of proper names. The names of key individuals (men) reappear constantly until the reader longs for a wall chart to keep them straight. The author has even provided a few small pieces of such a chart and they are helpful.

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