

Trade relationships among Indians and Europeans led to the forming of unions between European men and Indian women. At first these relationships were frowned upon by missionaries and colonial officials, but later attitudes changed because the definite advantages of marriage alliances on trade became apparent. Officials realized that maintenance of rigid rules could not be enforced at scattered outposts where loneliness could lead to the demoralization of employees:

Indian chiefs initially encouraged marital bonds between their women and Europeans, because they too recognized the advantages of such bonds upon trade relationships, but they insisted that the proper arrangements be observed. Traders who tried to sidestep the formalities of marriage "by the custom of the country,"¹ ran the risk of serious reprisal. One old voyageur explained: "Custom had to be observed in the Indian country; one could not just grab any woman one pleased."²

Conflict between furtraders and Indians seldom arose. When it did it was usually because the trader failed to respect Indian moral standards. One such incident occurred when a number of French men from a British outpost on the Bay forced some Cree women against their will into the trading post. The women avenged themselves with the cooperation of their husbands. They "informed their husbands, to be ready upon a signal they would make," and, at night,

"the women took the opportunity to wet the french fuzes with their urine and gave the signal, when their husbands gott in under cover of the night and put their enemies to the rout, when the french ran to their arm's and found how they was betrayd, and was killed being 8 in number."³

The large majority of men insisted that marriage by the custom of the country was just as valid as one contracted through a priest or magistrate. Marriages could be arranged without civil or religious ceremony by having a couple give their consent before a witness. When some of the traders were pressed to sanctify their unions through a church ceremony many refused to do so. One trader by the name of Peter Kene Odge, from Scotland, explained: "If many years of public recognition of the relationship, and his children did not constitute sufficient proof, no formal words of a priest or magistrate could help the matter." ⁴

As time went on more and more women were accepted into the trading posts because their skills became highly valued. They familiarized the trader with the languages and the customs of the tribes, tanned hides, repaired canoes, prepared sinews for snowshoes, planted and harvested corn and potatoes, picked berries, and prepared sagamite and pemmican. The women also snared small game, and fished, to ensure a constant food supply. The North West Company had gained a first hand knowledge of the value of Indian women from the French and therefore did not object to their intermarriage with the traders as did the officials of the Hudson's Bay Company. The latter took a longer time to recognize the women's usefulness and found it difficult to convince its London Committee of the fact:

Throughout the eighteenth century, officers of the Bay argued with the London Committee that it was essential to keep Indian women in the posts as they performed important tasks which the British had not yet mastered." ⁵

Eventually the practice was accepted, but as time went by a number of incidents became of great concern to the Indians who had permitted their women to form unions with Europeans. Some traders abandoned their families and went to England when the time of their employment with the trading company expired. Others brought European women with them to the fort where the Indian family resided, (which from thereon ^{often} declined in favor, or ceased to be considered altogether.) .

The trader, who was under obligation to serve the Company for ten years, was not entirely to blame for deserting his Indian family. The Company forbade employees to take their Native families with them to England, at the same time they were not allowed to settle in Rupertsland either. This proved to be a serious problem for them. Some retiring servants left provision for their Indian families in the form of money or goods with the Company store, while others arranged for their wives to marry someone else. This custom was referred to as "turning off." Letters of this period testify to the dilemma of the situation. Many Indian women returned to their former tribe when their European husbands died, retired, or left the Company. There were some who experienced difficulty in getting back to their own people, particularly if they had been away for a long time and were far away from their own kin. Those who managed to return raised their children with their mothers' people, or married Indian men, who were known to have been fond stepfathers to the mixed blood children.

In the final analysis the cases in which the trader endeavored to do their best by their wives outnumbered those in which women were maltreated. With the emergence of the mixed blood wife the trend was the formation of long and devoted marital relationships. ... As the mixed blood wife replaced the Indian wife, furtrade customs became less subject to Indian influence and evolved more in accord with European practices.⁶

1. Sylvia Van Kirk Many Tender Ties, Watson & Dwyer Publications, Manitoba
p. 40

2. Van Kirk, *Ibid.*, p. 40

3. Van Kirk, *Ibid.*, p. 40

4. Van Kirk, *Ibid.*, p. 52

5. Van Kirk, *Ibid.*, p. 54

6. Van Kirk, *Ibid.*, p. 122

For a summary of Van Kirk's book Many Tender Ties see *Beaver Magazine*, Winter 1972, No 13. "Women And The Furtrade."