Women in the Fur Trade

Women played an integral role in the fur trade, one that is often overlooked. While men usually took the lead in both the trapping and the trading, there were other dimensions to the functioning of the fur trade in which women were key. At home, often the women of a village were left to provide for their families on their own while the men were away for extended periods in pursuit of the increasingly scarce furs. More time was required to prepare the furs, which was often the job of women, increasing their workload. Similarly, for many groups, trading salmon with the Euro-Canadians was as important as trading furs, and the extra work needed to clean and dry the salmon was largely the women's task.

However, it was their participation in the social structure of fort life which marked women's most significant contribution to the fur trade, and also to the future population of British Columbia. First Nations women frequently married company employees and they and their children lived inside the fort, becoming bound up in complex social, economic, and political relationships. In some cases, especially in the more structured societies of the coast, marriages were considered to be alliances between high-ranking families and the officers of the trading post, forging a political and economic bond between the two sides. For example, Dr. John Kennedy, chief trader at Fort Simpson on the Nass River, married the daughter of Ligeex (Legaic), the highest-ranking chief of the Tsimshian. Partly because of this marriage, the Hudson's Bay Company moved Fort Simpson from Nisga’a territory south to Ligeex's traditional land.

Most marriages, however, operated at a more personal level. Aboriginal women offered companionship for the employees and a family environment, but they also relieved the men of domestic duties. As was the case in most societies throughout the world, women were not considered equal to men, and this belief certainly held true in these marriages. They suffered further from racial discrimination; there are accounts of a man's wife and children being hustled out of the parlour when visitors arrived.

The quality of the relationships which the women had when they lived inside the forts varied a great deal. Some had happy and loving marriages, and their partners shared in traditional culture and interacted with their families. Aboriginal women brought many strengths to these partnerships, but also gave up a great deal in the process. In some cases they were able to bridge two cultures and share skills and knowledge between them, such as those involved in food preparation. Euro-Canadian objects, such as chairs and tables were often viewed with suspicion by the older members of their families, but women were often able to demonstrate their utility and demystify these items. In the same way, they were able to bring an understanding of their culture to the men of the fort and break down at least some racial barriers.

For some men, these marriages were simply a convenience, and when they retired to eastern Canada or England, they often abandoned their wives and families. The famous court case Connolly v. Woolrich, the first important trial in Canada to acknowledge Aboriginal rights, resulted from such an incident. William Connolly had lived with his wife
Suzanne, daughter of a Cree chief, whom he had married according to Cree law, for thirty years. When he retired to Montreal, he left her and married his second cousin, Julia. In the 1860s, one of Suzanne’s sons, John, sued for half of the inheritance Connolly left, which his second wife Julia Woolrich had claimed solely. The Quebec courts upheld John’s argument that the first marriage was valid and that Suzanne’s son was entitled to his share of the inheritance. This decision was based the court recognising that Aboriginal law was in effect when Europeans colonized the land, and that their incoming legal system in no way eliminated the Aboriginal laws that predated it by centuries.

Another of William and Suzanne Connolly’s children was to rise to the highest ranks of British Columbia’s colonial society. Their daughter Amelia married James Douglas while they were posted at Fort St. James and later became Lady Douglas when James was made governor of the colony of Vancouver Island. Her understanding of Aboriginal customs and behaviour is credited with saving the life of Douglas during a confrontation at Fort St. James.

Amelia Douglas’ experience was unusual for children of mixed marriages. So much depended on the particular experience of the partnership and the environment in which they lived. On the Prairies, the children of Aboriginal women and fur trade employees shared many customs, and a distinctive Métis culture with its own language and values emerged. In British Columbia, such a singular culture did not develop. Many children of mixed marriages returned to their Aboriginal families, especially prior to the growth of settlements in the province. Some adopted their Euro-Canadian heritage and assimilated into mainstream culture. Others, however, found themselves stuck between two worlds, never completely accepted in either, and often struggling for acceptance. They were frequently burdened with the label “half-breed,” which in British Colombia, as elsewhere, took on a disparaging connotation. When the issue of Indian “status” was introduced under Canadian law, their situation was exacerbated as anyone deemed "non-status" had no rights under the Indian Act.

The significance of women during the fur trade era as wives, as helpers behind the fort walls, as intermediaries between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture, and perhaps most importantly, as mothers to future generations of British Columbians, cannot be over-estimated. They often sacrificed the traditional bonds with their culture, and risked much as they entered the world of the newcomers.