WESTERN CANADA: AN OUTLINE HISTORY

J. Arthur Lower

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An Outline History

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CONTENTS

LIST OF MAPS

LIST OF TABLES
(Appendix)

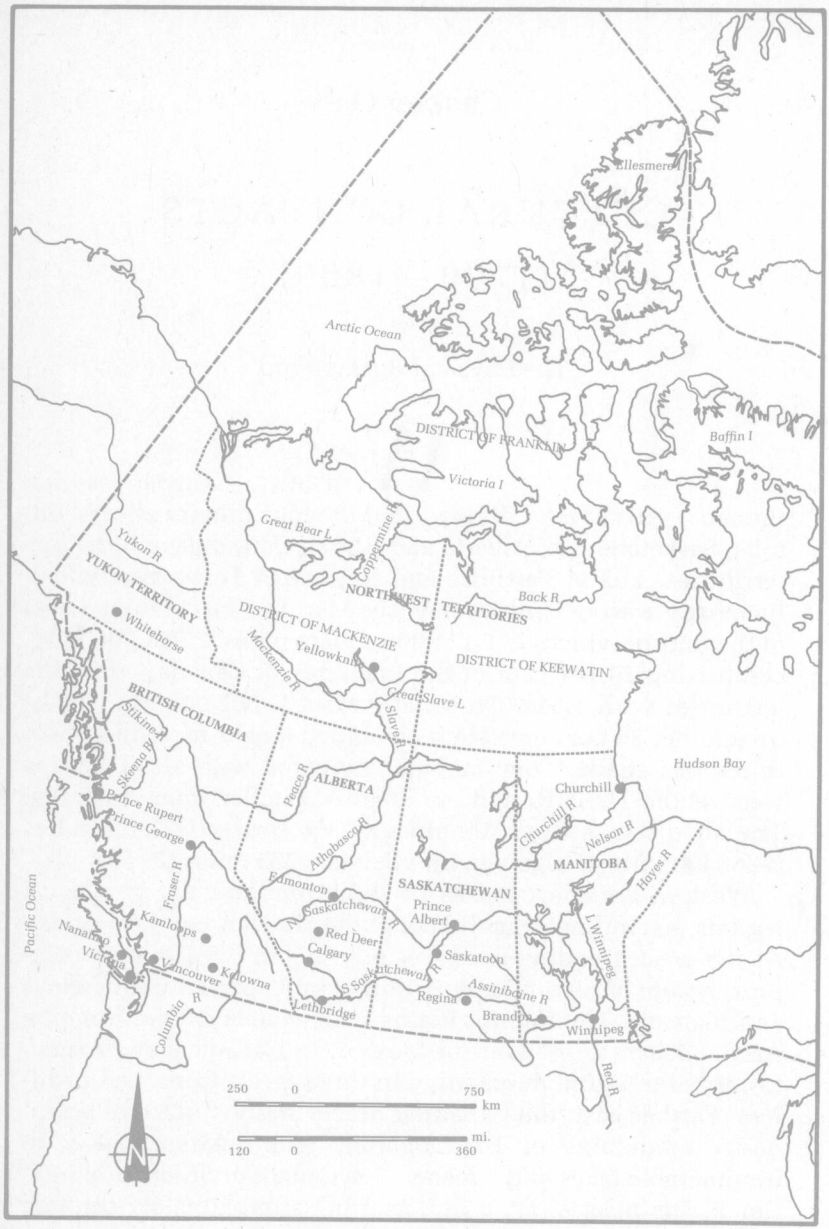
Chapter One

CULTURAL CONTACTS (1700 – 1800)

The Physical Background

WESTERN Canada is an immense area of land divided into the four provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia and the two territories, Yukon Territory and Northwest Territories, which lie mostly west of Hudson Bay (see Map 1). The combined area of the four provinces is 1,124,000 square miles (2 912 000 km^2), comprising 29 per cent of the total area of Canada, while the territories with 1,512,000 square miles (3 862 000 km^2) make up another 39 per cent. Their combined area is more than two-thirds of Canada. They may be compared with all of Europe west of the U.S.S.R. and are slightly smaller than Australia. The air distance from Winnipeg to Vancouver is 1,403 miles (2260 km); from Calgary to Inuvik it is 1,765 miles (2440 km).

Western Canada consists of three predominant geological regions (excluding a small area of the Hudson Bay Lowlands). At the west, trending northwesterly, is the Cordillera, a complex system of high mountain ranges interspersed with valleys and plateaus. The Interior Plains or Lowlands extend from the Arctic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. In Canada they broaden towards the south, descending in three levels from the Cordillera. Farther east, the Canadian Shield has a surface of worn-down mountains of Pre-Cambrian rock interspersed with innumerable lakes and streams. The Canadian Shield and Interior Plains meet along a line running approximately through



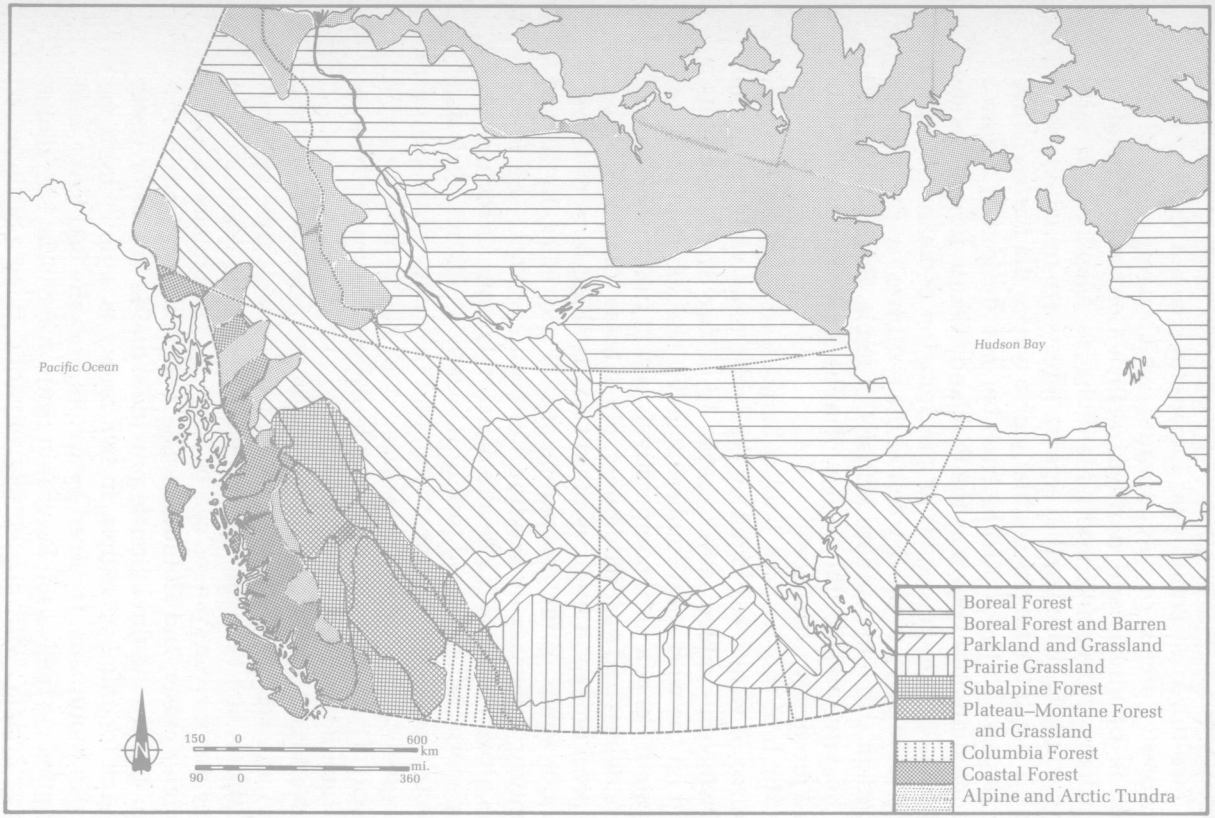
MAP 1: WESTERN CANADA

Great Bear Lake, Great Slave Lake, Lake Winnipeg and Lake of the Woods.

Two-thirds of continental Canada is covered by the Great Northern Forests, or boreal forests, which cover much of the prairie provinces and northern British Columbia, extending northwest from southeastern Manitoba (see Map 2). Both north and south of these great evergreen forests are transition belts. In the north the forests gradually give way to the Barren Lands or tundra. To the south the trees become deciduous across a band commonly known as the Parkland. This in turn dissolves into the prairie grasslands as precipitation decreases, eventually giving way to the dry belt of the southwest which extends sporadically into southern British Columbia. British Columbia is heavily forested, the variety of trees depending on altitude and proximity to the ocean.

Much of this western land is barren and infertile. The first source of wealth exploited by the white men was furs. In the nineteenth century settlers began to occupy the fertile belts, and on the west coast lumbering grew. The common vision of western Canada until comparatively recent times was a land of furs, wheat and vast wilderness. Since these limited resources depend on export trade, western Canada might have remained a poor annex of the prosperous central provinces. In the last century, however, its position has been reversed. The region has proven to contain a wealth of natural resources required by a modern industrial and technical society. Fuels, minerals and electric power are the most vital, and they have given birth to burgeoning secondary industries. With these have grown a spirit of prosperity and demands by westerners for a more influential voice in national affairs.

Nothing has had more influence on the patterns of exploration and settlement in western Canada than its river systems. Within a short distance of Jasper, Alberta, the headwaters of four major river systems can be seen: the Saskatchewan, Mackenzie, Fraser and Columbia. The Saskatchewan-Nelson system crosses the three prairie provinces and is the major water source for this vast region. In two branches it flows from the Rocky Mountains, is joined by waters from the Red River, and empties via the Nelson River into Hudson Bay. The Mackenzie River system, with numerous tributaries, flows northward to



MAP 2: NATURAL REGIONS

the Arctic Ocean. This vast drainage area, which has been opened to settlement only in recent years, is the largest in Canada and covers almost one-fifth of the nation. The Mackenzie is the only major Canadian river without dams and is still free from pollution of cities and industry, but recent industrial developments are beginning to affect the ecosystem of the river basin. Both the Saskatchewan and Mackenzie river systems cross several provincial or territorial borders and therefore the federal government has legislative authority over navigation, fisheries and agricultural uses of the water as well as pollution that results from or affects these uses. Provincial projects on these rivers require interprovincial or provincial-federal agreement. Such agreements are often not achieved until disputes are resolved and a compromise established.

The Fraser and Columbia river systems both flow northwards initially, then turn south and, after tortuous windings through the mountains, empty into the Pacific Ocean. The Columbia is a special problem because its outlet is in the United States. Other river systems that have significance in the history of western Canada include the Churchill and Hayes draining into Hudson Bay, the Coppermine and Back emptying into the Arctic Ocean, and the Stikine, Skeena and Yukon flowing into the Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea. Since the Columbia, Stikine and Yukon rivers flow from Canada through United States territory before reaching the ocean, they require international co-operation in areas such as dam construction, fisheries and pollution control.

A map that shows only the Saskatchewan-Nelson, Mackenzie, Fraser, Yukon and Back river systems would include almost all of western Canada. From the earliest explorations until the construction of modern transportation routes in the twentieth century, the rivers were the arteries of the west and pulsed with the movement of traders and settlers. Although today water transport is of minor importance, rivers remain vital to the region. They open routes for railways and highways through difficult terrain, provide hydroelectric power, permit irrigation of vast areas of arid land, supply necessary water for urban populations and continue to support fish, birds and other animal life. Waterways are one of western Canada's greatest assets and must be preserved and kept free of pollution.

The First Inhabitants

When the first white men arrived in the west they entered a region that was already inhabited. Over 30,000 years ago, towards the end of the Ice Age, the first stragglers crossed land that is now under Bering Strait and spread throughout the Americas. As time passed, these ancestors of the modern Indians and Inuit adjusted to their different environments and became divided into numerous linguistic groups.

Partly because the regions occupied by particular native linguistic groups have changed since the arrival of the first white people, and partly because there is often a melding of borders, authorities differ on the limits of each group. In a broad sense, in the mid-1700s, the western Indians may be divided from north to south, with some of their subgroups, as follows: various groups of Inuit, also called Eskimo; Athapaskan (such as Hare, Yellowknife, Slave, Chipewyan, Beaver, Sarcee); Algonkian (Cree); Algonkian Plains (Plains Cree, Blackfoot, Peigan, Blood, Gros Ventre); Siouan (Assiniboine); the Plateau Indians of British Columbia, who are related to the Athapaskan (Carrier, Chilcotin, Interior Salish, Kootenay); Pacific Coast (Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haida, Kwakiutl, Bella Coola, Salish, Nootka). See Map 3.

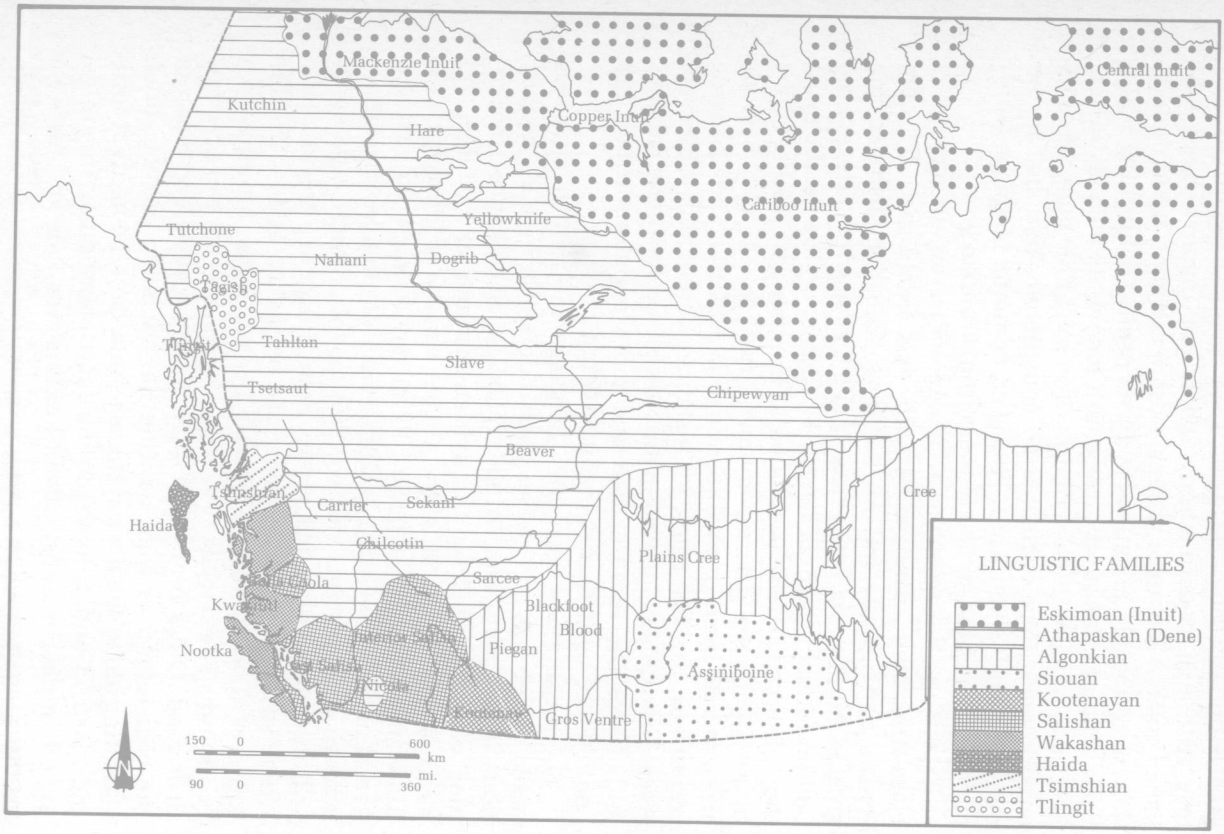
Many of these names were not used by the people but were given to them by outsiders, but other names, like "Dene" and "Kutchin" which are both Athapaskan, are their own words meaning "the people." "Inuit" means "the people," while "Eskimo" is an Algonkian name that they never used themselves. Neighbouring groups referred to each other by such names as "people of the mountains," "people of the swamps," "the timid people," and so on. Within the largest linguistic groupings, such as the Athapaskan, for example, which extends even beyond Canada, eastern groups would have difficulty speaking to those farthest west. On the other hand, the use of the Athapaskan and Algonkian languages among widely separated tribes probably indicates ancient associations and incidentally allowed the explorers and fur traders to advance from tribe to tribe with little language barrier.

In the immense area of North America the native peoples, over thousands of years, developed a wide divergence in their

patterns of living. Formal boundaries were not mapped, but each band and tribe associated itself with a recognized territory. Although modern ethnographers and linguists have established related language groups, with a common basic dialect, they were loosely organized with no central controlling body. Each band or community was a unit having its own characteristic economic, political, religious and social life adapted to its environment; they could not be considered "nations" in the modern usage of the word. However, common language facilitated trade and the spread of ideas from group to group.

Except on the west coast, where social organization was class-structured, band leadership was established by consensus and usually fell to the those who demonstrated the greatest hunting skill, physical strength or wisdom. The people had no formal system of land title, though on the Pacific coast they observed hereditary claims to hunting and fishing rights in a defined area. There were many rules for social behaviour since people lived in small bands under relatively unchanging conditions. Kinship rules, for instance, were strictly observed. Aggressive behaviour was mainly restricted to intertribal war, and it was the resource-rich and more populous tribes that could afford more than sporadic fighting.

The Indians had no written language and their history was based on legends and stories passed down through the generations. Today historians sift the archeological evidence, the peoples' oral traditions and the written accounts of travellers and missionaries. These all show a wide variety of lifestyles, customs and beliefs, as expected in an environment so vast and varied as western Canada's. Differences of climate, vegetation, geological formations and wildlife meant cultural differences within a single linguistic group. Some Inuit, in a treeless land where winters were long, depended on the sea and its wildlife for most food, clothing and building materials, hunting from boats and sledges made of skins and frames of bone or precious driftwood. Other Inuit were more nomadic and lived much of the year inland as well, hunting the migratory caribou, often travelling along the river systems to intercept the herds at fording places. Conditions made the Inuit enormously inventive, expert in devising specialized hunting weapons and tools for working with ice, rock and animal carcasses. Athapaskan-



MAP 3: MAJOR LINGUISTIC AND TRIBAL GROUPS

speaking peoples are the most widely distributed in North America. They were the hunting inhabitants of the parklands and forest regions north to the barren lands. The Dene, who comprise the most northerly groups, were a peaceful people and had little contact with whites until recent years. The most nomadic Athapaskans, they ranged along the tree line hunting the caribou, though they, too, were essentially a woodland people. The Algonkian Crees were more warlike and were found around Hudson Bay and northern Lake Winnipeg where large animals were abundant. Most of these northern peoples lived in small bands of a few families, travelling by snowshoe and canoe. At certain times of year when supplies were plentiful, many bands would come together to hunt caribou or fish a large run, and perhaps feast and celebrate as well.

The Blackfoot and Plains Cree were also Algonkians. At the time of European contact, the Blackfoot confederacy, which was an alliance of Blackfoot, Peigan and Blood, occupied the plains east of the Rocky Mountains while the Plains Cree spread out from Hudson Bay to the Rocky Mountains. They were bitter rivals since both depended on the buffalo; the latter became powerful middlemen in the fur trade. The Assiniboine came originally from the south and spoke a Sioux dialect. Movements of these plains hunters were determined by the buffalo's, and when the herds left the flatlands the people did the same, breaking up their summer camps of several hundred people into extended families of thirty to sixty to winter in the valleys and hunt together upon the buffalo's return. The Kootenays, in the Kootenay Valley, were once also buffalo hunters but had been driven across the mountains by the Peigans.

The Salish people lived mostly in the southern parts of present-day British Columbia and northern Washington. They were divided into two groups: the Interior Salish and the Coast Salish. The Interior Salish included the Shuswap, Lillooet, Thompson and Okanagan—seminomadic fishermen and hunters who supplemented their diet with the annual salmon run. The Coast Salish occupied the south coast while other groups such as the Tsimshian and Haida comprised the Northwest Coast cultures. These sea peoples were skilled canoeists, sea hunters and fishermen. The densely populated coastal cultures

were among the most complex in North America. The people lived in comparatively large groups in permanent homes. They had a high regard for material possessions, both personal and territorial, and ruling families displayed them ostentatiously. With an abundance of marine food, fruits, furs and cedar, they had the time and opportunities to pursue wealth and establish a varied ceremonial and cultural life. Their practical and decorative arts included carving and weaving. The plentiful labour force included a slave class, usually persons taken in war or trade. The several tribes, speaking different dialects, were not held together by any single political structure, and warring was frequent. Some groups became skilled traders, especially with the interior tribes seeking coastal goods. When the white men arrived, they were met by a people who were knowledgeable in trade and had a rich, distinctive culture.

The often illustrated accounts of early white traders preserved their impressions of first encounters with Indian communities; below are three excerpts from the European record of initial contact on the plains, in the north and on the coast.

Anthony Henday, in 1754–55, was the first white man seen by the Blackfoot. He visited the camp of the "Great Leader" where two thousand people were assembled in two hundred tents pitched in two rows:

> the Leader's tent [was] large enough to contain fifty persons . . . [I] desired of him to allow some of his young men to go down to the Fort with me where they could get Guns, etc. But he answered, it was too far off, & they could not live without Buffalo flesh; . . . though all might be got over if they were acquainted with a Canoe, and could eat Fish, which they never do. . . . The Chief further said that they never wanted food, as they followed the Buffalo and killed them with Bows and Arrows.

Henday also noted that "the Natives are good Horsemen, & kill the Buffalo on them." He probably did not realize that the horse was a relatively recent acquisition of the plains Indians and had dramatically changed their culture over the previous half century. Before the horse they had followed the roaming buffalo herds on foot, eking out a subsistence living; mounted, they could bring down all the meat they needed and the skins essential for clothing, shelter and even tools like cooking vessels. This new leisure allowed their decorative arts, dance and