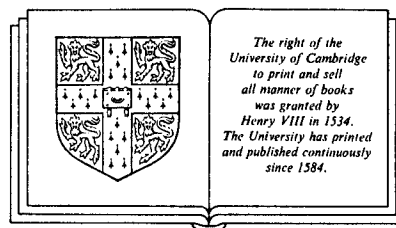


The middle ground

Indians, empires, and republics
in the Great Lakes region,
1650-1815

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#47

III

Dependency is an economic, political, and social relationship, but it can also be an environmental relationship. Economic change can produce environmental changes that undermine people's ability to feed and clothe themselves. Although the Algonquians retained a precarious hold on economic independence into the nineteenth century, they did have to face increasingly serious changes in the material world around them. In 1807, Trout, an Ottawa visionary, conveyed a message from the Great Spirit to the Indians living around Michilimackinac that was similar to several other prophetic messages of the period: "You complain," he told the Ottawas and Chippewas, "that the animals of the Forest are few and scattered. How should it be otherwise? You destroy them yourselves for their Skins only and leave their bodies to rot or give the best pieces to the Whites. I am displeased when I see this, and take them back to the Earth that they may not come to you again. You must kill no more animals than are necessary to feed and cloathe you."²⁶

The diminished natural world Trout and other visionaries complained of was less a product of the inexorable depletion brought on by the fur trade than it was a result of changes in the nature of that trade. Accounts of poor hunts and famines in the 1780s, for example, are not easily attributable to depletion due to the fur trade. All changes in the environment are not the direct result of human actions, and all cases of starvation among humans are not indicators of environmental decline. Climatic variations – drought or heavy winter snows – have direct and immediate, although often short-lived, effects on game populations. Fur trade returns vary not only with the abundance of game, but with the weather and the market. Mild winters in

¹⁷⁸¹, Haldimand Papers, 21781. Haldimand to De Peyster, Apr. 20, 1781, *MPHC* 10:471; see also, Henry Hamilton, State of the Trade with the Indian Countries, Shelburne Papers, 88:67, Clements Library; Hamilton to Haldimand, c. Sept. 1778, Haldimand Papers, 21781; De Peyster to Haldimand, May 27, 1781, Haldimand Papers, 21781.

In justifying the cession of most of the *pays d'en haut* to the Americans, Lord Shelburne repeated earlier French arguments: It cost the government more to hold the territory than the fur trade yielded, Stevens, *The Northwest Fur Trade*, 76–78. It was an argument with much merit, see A. L. Burt, "A New Approach to the Problem of the Western Posts," Canadian Historical Association, *Report of the Annual Meeting* (Ottawa: 1931), 71.

The British government derived duties from the fur trade that averaged £22,021.15.4 between 1793 and 1801, Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), 178.

²⁶ Substance of a Talk delivered at Le Macouinong . . . by the Indian Chief Le Maigaouis or the Trout coming from the first man created . . . May 4, 1807, PAC, M.G. 19, F. 16. See also the vision of "an old Indian woman," Oct. 24, 1803, Lawrence H. Gipson, *The Moravian Indian Mission on White River*, in vol. 23 of *Indiana Historical Collections* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1938), 262, and the vision of Tenskwatawa, Dec. 3, 1805, *ibid.*, 392.

which deer do not yard up in sheltered areas and in which inadequate snow cover hinders the ability of hunters to track or see deer and other game reduced fur trade yields. In more southerly areas, where Indians did not usually use snowshoes, heavy snows could disrupt the hunt. When natural factors affected the hunt, a report of a poor hunt might quickly be followed by reports of abundant game. Similarly, the chronic warfare of the 1770s and 1780s in the Ohio Valley kept hunters out of many areas, often restricted the duration of the hunt, and hurt food production, but it might have increased overall game populations. Lieutenant Governor Simcoe thought the increase in deer because of the war was "prodigious," and the Moravians reported that the area between the Muskingum and the Ohio rivers had become a war ground making game "very plentiful." Many travelers during the 1780s and early 1790s remarked on the abundance of game. When humans killed each other, animals received a respite.²⁷

²⁷ Famine and want were prevalent in the Ohio country in the 1780s, but this was the result of war, crop failures, and terrible weather rather than game depletion. In 1782 there was famine in the Ohio Valley. And in 1784, famine returned again when the harvest failed and then a bad winter depleted deer populations. In 1787 once more there was a general famine in the Indian country from Detroit to the Miami, and in 1788 widespread hunger followed a winter in which the snow was six feet deep between the Ohio and Lake Erie. The Indians said it was the worst winter in living memory. This culminated in a severe famine in 1789 when Indians delayed planting because of fears of American invasion. Then worms attacked the corn – both at the Indian towns from Niagara to the Miami and at the white settlements in Detroit – and, finally, frost killed much of the remaining corn. The Indians were reduced to eating their horses; there were reports of starvation, and widespread sickness took many lives at Detroit. The next year brought little relief, for everywhere, David Zeisberger noted, there was "famine and want."

All of this does not mean permanent game depletion, see, e.g., Beverly Bond, Jr. (ed.), "Two Western Journeys of John Filson, 1785," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 9 (1923): 324–328; Butler's Journal, Oct. 12–13, Oct. 17, 1785, in Neville B. Craig, Esq. (ed.), *The Olden Time* (Pittsburgh: Dumars, 1846; Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Reprint Co., 1976), 445–47, 450; "Narrative of John Heckewelder's Journey to the Wabash in 1792," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 12 (1888): 37, 51, 165, 173–74, 176; Sargent to Symmes and Putnam, Aug. 5, 1792, in Rowena Buell (ed.), *The Memoirs of Rufus Putnam and Certain Official Papers and Correspondence* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903), 310; Speeches . . . Feb. 1, 1793, in H. A. Washington (ed.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859), 8:181. For "prodigious" increase, see Simcoe to Committee of the Privy Council, Sept. 1, 1794, in *Simcoe Papers*, 3:55. For abundance, see Gipson, *Moravian Mission*, Sept. 30, 1802, and Autobiography of Abraham Luckenbach, in Gipson, *Moravian Mission*, 484, 599; Constantin-François Volney, *A View of the Soil and Climate of the United States of America* . . . (Philadelphia: T & G Palmer, 1804, repr.), 341.

William Burnett reported a poor hunt at Kankakee in 1789–90. Burnett to Hands, Feb. 2, 1790. It was followed by relatively good hunts in the early 1790s, and then a very poor hunt in 1795–96, Burnett to Chaboillier & Young, May 17, 1796. Two years later (1797–98) he reported a good year. Burnett to Parker Gerrard & O'Gilly (sic), Burnett to John O'Gilly & Co., May 26, 1798. But it was followed in 1798–99 by a mild winter and a poor hunt, Burnett to Robt. Innes & Co., Dec. 20, 1798, all in Cunningham (ed.), *Letter Book of William Burnett*, 32, 70, 89, 94–95, 113. Around Detroit, the winter of 1784–85 was mild, which meant a poor hunt, but, supposedly, there was good hunting to the south of there, John MacPherson to Gray, Mar.