

The Fur Trade in North America

The fur trade was important in the history of all of Canada. The quip that Canada was probably the only country in the world to be founded on the whims of the fashion industry is true in many respects. The fashion referred to was the beaver hat. European **clothiers** had used fur for centuries to make or trim cloaks. Furs were also used to cover beds – very welcome on cold winter nights in houses with primitive heating systems! But hats made from beaver felt became a fashion rage that swept all over Europe. As a result of the demand for furs in Europe, traders eventually traveled from one end of the continent of North America to the other, using the rivers and lakes as highways, in search of furs to supply this demand.

Fur traders were the leading edge of the wave of European settlers who later came to make Canada their home. Almost everywhere, Native peoples met fur traders long before they encountered other Europeans. Because the traders came to do business with the Native peoples, who also profited from the exchange, the relationship between the European traders and

the Native peoples was one of equals. The fur traders had no desire to conquer the Native peoples, or to change their ways of life or beliefs. It was a case of mutual dependency – the traders bought furs, which Native peoples could get relatively easily, and they sold goods, such as metal hatchets and pots and glass beads, which Native peoples wanted.

The history of western Canada was, in a sense, part of the “business plan” of the large fur trading companies. The fur traders were not colonialists. They had no desire to settle permanently in the lands in which they traded. They were **economic imperialists** – and wanted to exploit the land for profit. To further this business plan, fur traders traveled and mapped the network of rivers and lakes in the west and north of the country. They negotiated trading deals with many of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples, and, eventually, they crossed an entire continent.

Clothiers – a maker or seller of clothes or cloth.

Economic Imperialists – Imperialism is the domination of one country by another, politically, economically, or culturally. Economic imperialism refers to economic domination.

Cranny, Michael (1998). *Crossroads: A Meeting of Nations* (p. 256-257). Scarborough, Canada: Prentice Hall Ginn Canada.