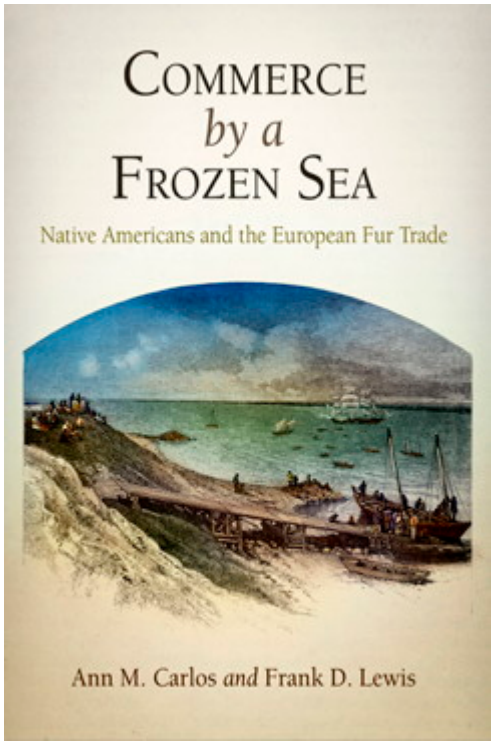
For the Want of a Good Hat



At the heart of *Commerce by a Frozen Sea* is the beaver hat, which by the seventeenth century had become an essential part of European men's fashion. With a high content of beaver "wool," a wet hat would hold its shape. Wet or dry, it was stronger, warmer and more lightweight than its cloth counterpart. Initially, all beaver hats available on the European market were made from European beaver by Russian hatters who had created the complicated felting technique to separate the wool hair from the longer guard hairs on the pelt. When England and France finally developed their own hatters by the early seventeenth century, they relied heavily on North American beaver, which came initially in two types: parchment (sundried skins) and coat (which had been used as clothing by Indians for about a year before being traded). The latter was preferred by hatters since the normal wear process caused the guard hairs to fall out naturally, requiring less work to harvest the wool. When combined, parchment and coat beaver created a high-end hat. (Hudson Bay region beavers produced particularly exceptional pelts due to the subarctic winters.) The ensuing demand for beaver motivated both the French and the English to devote considerable resources to trading with Indians for the pelt.

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Economists Ann Carlos and Frank Lewis use this demand for beaver to examine trade between the Cree and Assiniboin Indians who resided in what is now Canada and Britain's Hudson Bay Company (which covers much of present-day Manitoba,

Saskatchewan, and Alberta). Focusing on the Hudson Bay region reveals a different fur trade than the one described by other scholars. As Carlos and Lewis observe, due to the "great distance involved, France, England, and Indian peoples in the Bay region interacted to a large extent outside the political forces that played out in the lower thirteen colonies and New France" (3). Because Indians were the sole purveyors of pelts in Hudson Bay, trading beaver for a host of consumer goods, Carlos and Lewis illuminate natives not just as producers but also as consumers.

The authors draw their evidence from the rich collection of letters, post journals, and account books between the post managers on the Hudson Bay and the firm's head office in London. Post managers exchanged directly with Indians, set prices, and made copious notes on Indian consumption preferences of European goods which they reported in turn to London. Carlos and Lewis found ten to twenty types of furs provided by Indians and sixty to seventy types of consumer goods sold by the company in these records. Company employees worked from the "official standard," which was the company price list with all goods valued by the region's monetary unit: "made beaver." This facilitated trade during the busy season and gave post employees a base value to work from. There was some leeway as company trading posts closer to French posts had to keep their prices competitive, although any deviation had to be explained to London in the post manager's yearly report.

Like earlier scholars, including Calvin Martin (*Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade*) and Shepard Krech III (*The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*), Carlos and Lewis ask why Indians, who were in sole control of the beaver population, chose to overhunt beaver despite the fact that this limited their access to consumer goods in the long run. Carlos and Lewis conclude that prior to the arrival of the Europeans, Indians had neither the tools (such as ice chisels and twine) nor the desire to overhunt beaver, which only served as a food source during times of hardship or feasts (the tail was a delicacy). But once they had access to luxury goods such as tobacco, beads, lace, jewelry and vermillion, the Indians took advantage of high fur prices to purchase these items, which raised their standard of living. This self-defeating desire to consume was one major reason for the decline in the beaver population.

Nonetheless, as long as there were beaver pelts to trade, Indians had a significant degree of leverage as consumers. With both France and England in the region, Indians could play the two powers off one another, and trade goods had to be satisfactory. Post managers tried with various levels of success to make officials in London understand what goods met Indian demands. For example, knives and guns turned brittle and broke in the subarctic climate if the metal was even slightly flawed. Post correspondence shows that Indians were so attuned to the quality of the metal goods they traded for, rather than what color the handles were, that London company officials eventually sent gunsmiths to the posts to repair faulty guns rather than shipping the broken ones back.

Consumer goods fell into distinct categories. “Guns were the highest-priced item,” report Carlos and Lewis, and “accounted for seventy to eighty percent of [Indian] expenditure on producer goods” (86). Household goods such as kettles, blankets, knives and awls accounted for ten percent (falling to just over five percent over the course of their study). Luxury goods, which Carson and Lewis divide into three categories, made up the rest: “tobacco and related goods; alcohol and related goods; and other luxuries, including beads, cloth, lace, jewelry, and vermillion among many others” (87). By far the most frequently purchased luxury item was tobacco, which Carlos and Lewis note has been grossly overlooked by other scholars. In contrast, the primary product Indians consumed was never alcohol. At the height of alcohol consumption, around 1760, Bay records show that Indians were still drinking far less than European colonists and Continentals: “at most four two-ounce drinks per person for the entire year” at a time when colonists were drinking 279 two-ounce drinks (93). As fur prices rose, household and producer goods remained steady but Indian purchases of luxury goods increased.

But the penchant for luxury goods cannot entirely explain the decline of the beaver population. Overhunting, Carlos and Lewis argue, was also a function of the fact that beaver were a “common-pool resource,” meaning that it was impossible to prevent others from trapping the beaver. Tribes did not control the beaver population. Moreover, in hard times, Indians would hunt the beaver for food because of their desire to feed those in need. Still, most ended up being traded to the Europeans, and between 1700 and 1763, 2.75 million beaver pelts were received at Hudson Bay Company posts alone—in addition to those received at other British colonial or French posts.

An examination of the consumer goods in Indian homes allows Carson and Lewis to compare Indian and European standards of living and consumption practices. Their findings are striking: “The commodities—beads, combs, magnifying glasses, looking glasses or mirrors, sashes, scissors, thimbles, and shoes—mirror the inventories of both European and colonial households” (105). The authors conclude that mid-eighteenth century Indians were materially equal to low-income English households, although their comparison shows that Indians had better diet and clothing than Europeans, but that Europeans had better housing (due in large part to its durability) and consumed more luxury goods, especially alcohol. In their behavior as consumers and laborers they were not that unlike industrious workers in Europe—ultimately enticed to work harder to purchase luxury goods.

The economic focus of this work is at once its greatest strength and greatest weakness. On the one hand, *Commerce by a Frozen Sea* allows us to see the fur trade in a new light with Indians as active and vocal consumers at its center. By making use of the company’s account books and extrapolating data based on those figures, it provides a detailed look at the fur trade that is absent from social and cultural views of the fur trade (such as Jennifer Brown’s *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* and Sylvia Van Kirk’s *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870*). It provides

new explanations for overhunting beaver which challenge the notion of Indians as better ecological managers than Europeans, and gives concrete figures to prove alcohol was not the dominant European good Indians consumed. The detailed look at the types of commodities and their values, and the comparisons to European households, make this a valuable resource as historians continue to make sense of this period. However, it is also truly an economic history, which can make for a cumbersome read. While the authors usually explain jargon, the many formulas and charts scattered throughout the chapters would probably daunt undergraduates. The lack of narrative tends to make the people disappear, which is odd given that this work is fundamentally about human agency. The authors are right that the isolation of the Hudson Bay region allows us to see Euro-Indian interaction in a way that is normally hidden by politics, violence and middlemen. However, such isolation also means that the Bay is likely the exception to the rule rather than representative of the fur trade as a whole. They leave it to the reader to do additional reading to compare the experiences in the Bay to posts elsewhere. However, since this work joins a rich literature on the fur trade, such a comparison is not difficult.