

From: Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales' Fort in Hudson's Bay, to the Northern Ocean . . . in the years 1769, 1770, 1771 and 1772* (London, Eng: Strahan and Cadell, 1795).



Matonabee

In the evening of the twentieth, we were joined from the Westward by a famous Leader, called Matonabee, mentioned in my instructions; who, with his followers, or gang, was also going to Prince of Wales's Fort, with furs, and other articles for trade. This Leader, when a youth, resided several years at the above Fort, and was not only a perfect master of the Southern Indian language, but by being frequently with the Company's servants, had acquired several words of English, and was one of the men who brought the latest accounts of the Coppermine River; and it was on his information, added to that of one I-dot-le-ezey, (who is since dead,) that this expedition was set on foot.

20th

1770.

September

The courteous behaviour of this stranger struck me very sensibly. As soon as he was acquainted with our distress, he got such skins as we had with us dressed for the Southern Indians, and furnished me with a good warm suit of otter and other skins: but, as it was not in his power to provide us with snow-shoes, (being then on

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the barren ground,) he directed us to a little river which he knew, and where there was a small range of woods, which, though none of the best, would, he said, furnish us with temporary snow-shoes and sledges, that might materially assist us during the remaining part of our journey. We spent several nights in company with this Leader, though we advanced towards the Fort at the rate of ten or twelve miles a day; and as provisions abounded, he made a grand feast for me in the Southern Indian style, where there was plenty of good eating, and the whole concluded with singing and dancing, after the Southern Indian style and manner. In this amusement my home-guard Indians bore no inconsiderable part, as they were both men of some consequence when at home, and well known to Matonabee: but among the other Northern Indians, to whom they were not known, they were held in no estimation; which indeed is not to be wondered at, when we consider that the value of a man among those people, is always proportioned to his abilities in hunting; and as my two Indians had not exhibited any great talents that way, the Northern Indians shewed them as much respect as they do in common to those of very moderate talents among themselves.

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During my conversation with this Leader, he asked me very seriously, If I would attempt another journey for the discovery of the Copper-mines? And on my answering in the affirmative, provided I could get better guides than I had hitherto been furnished with, he said he would readily engage in that service, provided the Governor at the Fort would employ him. In answer to this, I assured him his offer would be gladly accepted; and as I had already experienced every hardship that was likely to accompany any future trial, I was determined to complete the discovery, even at the risque of life itself. Matonabee assured me, that by the accounts received from his own countrymen, the Southern Indians, and myself, it was very probable I might not experience so much hardship during the whole journey, as I had already felt, though scarcely advanced one third part of the journey.

He attributed all our misfortunes to the misconduct of my guides, and the very plan we pursued, by the desire of the Governor, in not taking any women with us on this journey, was, he said, the principal thing that occasioned all our wants: “for, said he, when all the men are heavy laden, they can neither hunt nor travel to any considerable distance; and in case they meet with success in hunting, who is to carry the produce of their labour? Women, added he, were made for labour; one of them can carry, or haul, as much as two men can do. They also pitch our tents, make and mend our clothing, keep us warm at night; and, in fact, there is no such thing as travelling any considerable distance, or for any length of time, in this country, without their assistance.” “Women, said he again, though they do every thing, are maintained at a trifling expence; for as they always stand cook, the very licking of their fingers in scarce times, is sufficient for their subsistence.” This, however odd as it may appear, is but too true a description of the situation of women in this country: it is at least so in appearance; for the women always carry the provisions, and it is more than probable they help themselves when the men are

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October

not present.

Early in the morning of the twenty-third, I struck out of the road to the Eastward, with my two companions and two or three Northern Indians, while Matonabee and his crew continued their course to the Factory, promising to walk so slow that we might come up with them again; and in two days we arrived at the place to which we were directed. We went to work immediately in making snow-shoe frames and sledges; but notwithstanding our utmost endeavours, we could not complete them in less than four days. On the first of November we again proceeded on our journey toward the Factory; and on the sixth, came up with Matonabee and his gang: after which we proceeded on together several days; when I found my new acquaintance, on all occasions, the most sociable, kind, and sensible Indian I had ever met with. He was a man well known, and, as an Indian, of universal knowledge, and generally respected.

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25th.

November
1st.

In stature, Matonabee was above the common size, being nearly six feet high¹; and, except that his neck was rather (though not much) too short, he was one of the finest and best proportioned men that I ever saw. In complexion he was dark, like the other Northern Indians, but his face was not disfigured by that ridiculous custom of marking the cheeks with three or four black lines. His features were regular and agreeable, and yet so strongly marked and expressive, that they formed a complete index of his mind; which, as he never intended to deceive or dissemble, he never wished to conceal. In conversation he was easy, lively, and agreeable, but exceedingly modest; and at table, the nobleness and elegance of his manners might have been admired by the first personages in the world; for to the vivacity of a Frenchman, and the sincerity of an Englishman, he added the gravity and nobleness of a Turk; all so happily blended, as to render his company and conversation universally pleasing to those who understood either the Northern or Southern Indian languages, the only languages in which he could converse.

He was remarkably fond of Spanish wines, though he never drank to excess; and as he would not partake of spirituous liquors, however fine in quality or plainly mixed, he was always master of himself. As no man is exempt from frailties, it is natural to suppose that as a man he had his share; but the greatest with which I can charge him, is jealousy, and that sometimes carried him beyond the bounds of humanity.

[Indian Wives]

In the night, one of Matonabee's wives and another woman eloped: it was supposed they went off to the Eastward, in order to meet their former husbands, from whom they had been sometime before taken by force. This affair made more noise and bustle than I could have supposed; and Matonabee seemed entirely disconcerted, and quite inconsolable for the loss of his wife. She was certainly by far the handsomest of all his flock, of a moderate size, and had a fair complexion; she apparently possessed a mild temper, and very engaging manners. In fact, she seemed to have every good quality that could be expected in a Northern Indian woman, and that could render her an agreeable companion to an inhabitant of this part of the world. She had not, however, appeared happy in her late situation; and chose rather to be the sole wife of a sprightly young fellow of no note, (though very capable of maintaining her,) than to have the seventh or eighth share of the affection of the greatest man in the country. I am sorry to mention an incident which happened while we were building the canoes at Clowey, and which by no means does honour to Matonabee: it is no less a crime than that of having actually stabbed the husband of the above-mentioned girl in three places; and had it not been for timely assistance, would certainly have murdered him, for no other reason than because the poor man had spoken disrespectfully of him for having taken his wife away by force. The cool deliberation with which Matonabee committed this bloody action, convinced me it had been a long premeditated design; for he no sooner heard of the man's arrival, than he opened one of his wives' bundles, and, with the greatest composure, took out a new long box-handled knife, went into the man's tent, and, without any preface whatever, took him by the collar, and began to execute his horrid design. The poor man anticipating his danger, fell on his face, and called for assistance; but before any could be had he received three wounds in the back. Fortunately for him, they all happened on the shoulder-blade, so that his life was spared. When Matonabee returned to his tent, after committing this horrid deed, he sat down as composedly as if nothing had happened, called for water to wash his bloody hands and knife, smoked his pipe as usual, seemed to be perfectly at ease, and asked if I did not think he had done right?

1771.

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It has ever been the custom among those people for the men to wrestle for any woman to whom they are attached; and, of course, the strongest party always carries off the prize. A weak man, unless he be a good hunter and well-beloved, is seldom permitted to keep a wife that a stronger man thinks worth his notice: for at any time when the wives of those strong wrestlers are heavy-laden either with furs or provisions, they make no scruple of tearing any other man's wife from his bosom, and making her bear a part of his luggage. This custom prevails throughout all their tribes, and causes a great spirit of emulation among their youths, who are upon all occasions, from their childhood, trying their strength and skill in wrestling. This enables them to protect their property, and particularly their wives, from the hands of those powerful ravishers; some of whom make almost a livelihood by taking what they please from the weaker parties, without making them any return. Indeed, it is represented as an act of great generosity, if they

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condescend to make an unequal exchange; as, in general, abuse and insult are the only return for the loss which is sustained.

The way in which they tear the women and other property from one another, though it has the appearance of the greatest brutality, can scarcely be called fighting. I never knew any of them receive the least hurt in these rencontres; the whole business consists in hauling each other about by the hair of the head; they are seldom known either to strike or kick one another. It is not uncommon for one of them to cut off his hair and to grease his ears, immediately before the contest begins. This, however, is done privately; and it is sometimes truly laughable, to see one of the parties strutting about with an air of great importance, and calling out, "Where is he? Why does he "not come out?" when the other will bolt out with a clean shorn head and greased ears, rush on his antagonist, seize him by the hair, and though perhaps a much weaker man, soon drag him to the ground, while the stronger is not able to lay hold on him. It is very frequent on those occasions for each party to have spies, to watch the other's motions, which puts them more on a footing of equality. For want of hair to pull, they seize each other about the waist, with legs wide extended, and try their strength, by endeavouring to vie who can first throw the other down.

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On these wrestling occasions the standers-by never attempt to interfere in the contest; even one brother offers not to assist another, unless it be with advice, which, as it is always delivered openly on the field during the contest, may, in fact, be said to be equally favourable to both parties. It sometimes happens that one of the wrestlers is superior in strength to the other; and if a woman be the cause of the contest, the weaker is frequently unwilling to yield, notwithstanding he is greatly overpowered. When this happens to be the case, the relations and friends, or other bye-standers, will sometimes join to persuade the weaker combatant to give up the contest, lest, by continuing it, he should get bruised and hurt, without the least probability of being able to protect what he is contending for. I observed that very few of those people were dissatisfied with the wives which had fallen to their lot, for whenever any considerable number of them were in company, scarcely a day passed without some overtures being made for contests of this kind; and it was often very unpleasant to me, to see the object of the contest sitting in pensive silence watching her fate, while her husband and his rival were contending for the prize. I have indeed not only felt pity for those poor wretched victims, but the utmost indignation, when I have seen them won, perhaps, by a man whom they mortally hated. On those occasions their grief and reluctance to follow their new lord has been so great, that the business has often ended in the greatest brutality; for, in the struggle, I have seen the poor girls stripped quite naked, and carried by main force to their new lodgings. At other times it was pleasant enough to see a fine girl led off the field from a husband she disliked, with a tear in one eye and a finger on the other: for custom, or delicacy if you please, has taught them to think it necessary to whimper a little, let the change be ever so much to their inclination. I have throughout this account given the women the appellation of girls, which is

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pretty applicable, as the objects of contests are generally young, and without any family: few of the men chuse to be at the trouble of maintaining other people's children, except on particular occasions, which will be taken notice of hereafter.

Some of the old men, who are famous on account of their supposed skill in conjuration, have great influence in persuading the rabble from committing those outrages; but the humanity of these sages is seldom known to extend beyond their own families. In defence of them they will exert their utmost influence; but when their own relations are guilty of the same crime, they seldom interfere. This partial conduct creates some secret, and several open enemies; but the generality of their neighbours are deterred, through fear or superstition, from executing their revenge, and even from talking disrespectfully of them, unless it be behind their backs; which is a vice of which almost every Indian in this country, without exception, is guilty.

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Notwithstanding the Northern Indians are so covetous, and pay so little regard to private property as to take every advantage of bodily strength to rob their neighbours, not only of their goods, but of their wives, yet they are, in other respects, the mildest tribe, or nation, that is to be found on the borders of Hudson's Bay: for let their affronts or losses be ever so great, they never will seek any other revenge than that of wrestling. As for murder, which is so common among all the tribes of Southern Indians, it is seldom heard of among them. A murderer is shunned and detested by all the tribe, and is obliged to wander up and down, forlorn and forsaken even by his own relations and former friends. In that respect a murderer may truly be compared to Cain, after he had killed his brother Abel. The cool reception he meets with by all who know him, occasions him to grow melancholy, and he never leaves any place but the whole company say, "There goes the murderer!" The women, it is true, sometimes receive an unlucky blow from their husbands for misbehaviour, which occasions their death; but this is thought nothing of: and for one man or woman to kill another out of revenge, or through jealousy, or any other account, is so extraordinary, that very few are now fined their regard wholly to their children, particularly to the youngest, scarcely ever mentioning their mother.

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[Murder of the Esquimaux]

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May

It should have been observed, that during our stay at Clowey a great number of Indians entered into a combination with those of my party to accompany us to the Copper-mine River; and with no other intent than to murder the Esquimaux, who are understood by the Copper Indians to frequent that river in considerable

numbers. This scheme, notwithstanding the trouble and fatigue, as well as danger, with which it must be obviously attended, was nevertheless so universally approved by those people, that for some time almost every man who joined us proposed to be of the party. Accordingly, each volunteer, as well as those who were properly of my party, prepared a target, or shield, before we left the woods of Clowey. Those targets were composed of thin boards, about three quarters of an inch thick, two feet broad, and three feet long; and were intended to ward off the arrows of the Esquimaux. Notwithstanding these preparations, when we came to leave the women and children, as has been already mentioned, only sixty volunteers would go with us; the rest, who were nearly as many more, though they had all prepared targets, reflecting that they had a great distance to walk, and that no advantage could be expected from the expedition, very prudently begged to be excused, saying, that they could not be spared for so long a time from the maintenance of their wives and families; and particularly, as they did not see any then in our company, who seemed willing to encumber themselves with such a charge. This seemed to be a mere evasion, for I am clearly of opinion that poverty on one side, and avarice on the other, were the only impediments to their joining our party; had they possessed as many European goods to squander away among their countrymen as Matonabee and those of my party did, in all probability many might have been found who would have been glad to have accompanied us.

When I was acquainted with the intentions of my companions, and saw the warlike preparations that were carrying on, I endeavoured as much as possible to persuade them from putting their inhuman design into execution; but so far were my intreaties from having the wished-for effect, that it was concluded I was actuated by cowardice; and they told me, with great marks of derision, that I was afraid of the Esquimaux. As I knew my personal safety depended in a great measure on the favourable opinion they entertained of me in this respect, I was obliged to change my tone, and replied, that I did not care if they rendered the name and race of the Esquimaux extinct; adding at the same time, that though I was no enemy of the Esquimaux, and did not see the necessity of attacking them without cause, yet if I should find it necessary to do it, for the protection of any one of my company, my own safety out of the question, so far from being afraid of a poor defenceless Esquimaux, whom I despised more than feared, nothing should be wanting on my part to protect all who were with me. This declaration was received with great satisfaction; and I never afterwards ventured to interfere with any of their war-plans. Indeed, when I came to consider seriously, I saw evidently that it was the highest folly for an individual like me, and in my situation, to attempt to turn the current of a national prejudice which had subsisted between those two nations from the earliest periods, or at least as long as they had been acquainted with the existence of each other.

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We had scarcely arrived at the Copper-mine River when four Copper Indians joined us, and brought with them two canoes. They had seen all the Indians who were sent from us at various times, except Matonabee's brother, and three others that were first dispatched from Congecathawhachaga.

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14th.

On my arrival here I was not a little surprised to find the river differ so much from the description which the Indians had given of it at the Factory; for, instead of being so large as to be navigable for shipping, as it had been represented by them, it was at that part scarcely navigable for an Indian canoe, being no more than one hundred and eighty yards wide, every where full of shoals, and no less than three falls were in sight at first view.

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Near the water's edge there is some wood; but not one tree grows on or near the top of the hills between which the river runs. There appears to have been formerly a much greater quantity than there is at present; but the trees seem to have been set on fire some years ago, and, in consequence, there is at present ten sticks lying on the ground, for one green one which is growing beside them. The whole timber appears to have been, even in its greatest prosperity, of so crooked and dwarfish a growth as to render it of little use for any purpose but firewood.

Soon after our arrival at the river-side, three Indians were sent off as spies, in order to see if any Esquimaux were inhabiting the river-side between us and the sea. After walking about three quarters of a mile by the side of the river, we put up, when most of the Indians went a hunting, and killed several musk-oxen and some deer. They were employed all the remainder of the day and night in splitting and drying the meat by the fire. As we were no then in want of provisions, and as deer and other animals were so plentiful, that each day's journey might have provided for itself, I was at a loss to account for this unusual conomy of my companions; but was soon informed, that those preparations were made with a view to have victuals enough ready-cooked to serve us to the river's mouth, without being obliged to kill any in our way, as the report of the guns, and the smoke of the fires, would be liable to alarm the natives, if any should be near at hand, and give them an opportunity of escaping.

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Early in the morning of the fifteenth, we set out, when I immediately began my survey, which I continued about ten miles down the river, till heavy rain coming on we were obliged to put up; and the place where we lay that night was the end, or edge of the woods, the whole space between it and the sea being entirely barren hills and wide open marshes. In the course of this day's survey, I found the river as full of shoals as the part which I had seen before; and in many places it was so greatly diminished in its width, that in our way we passed by two more capital falls.

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Early in the morning of the sixteenth, the weather being fine and pleasant, I again proceeded with my survey, and continued it for ten miles farther down the river; but still found it the same as before, being every where full of falls and shoals. At this time (it being about noon) the three men who had been sent as spies met us on their return, and informed my companions that five tents of Esquimaux were on the west side of the river. The situation, they said, was very convenient for surprising them; and, according to their account, I judged it to be about twelve miles from the place we met the spies. When the Indians received this intelligence, no farther attendance or attention was paid to my survey, but their whole thoughts were immediately engaged in planning the best method of attack, and how they might steal on the poor Esquimaux the ensuing night, and kill them all while asleep. To accomplish this bloody design more effectually, the Indians thought it necessary to cross the river as soon as possible; and, by the account of the spies, it appeared that no part was more convenient for the purpose than that where we had met them, it being there very smooth, and at a considerable distance from any fall. Accordingly, after the Indians had put all their guns, spears, targets, &c. in good order, we crossed the river, which took up some time.

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When we arrived on the West side of the river, each painted the front of his target or shield; some with the figure of the Sun, others with that of the Moon, several with different kinds of birds and beasts of prey, and many with the images of imaginary beings, which, according to their silly notions, are the inhabitants of the different elements, Earth, Sea, Air, &c.

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On enquiring the reason of their doing so, I learned that each man painted his shield with the image of that being on which he relied most for success in the intended engagement. Some were contented with a single representation; while others, doubtful, as I suppose, of the quality and power of any single being, had their shields covered to the very margin with a group of hieroglyphics quite unintelligible to every one except the painter. Indeed, from the hurry in which this business was necessarily done, the want of every colour but red and black, and the deficiency of skill in the artist, most of those paintings had more the appearance of a number of accidental blotches, than “of any thing that is on the earth, or in “the water under the earth;” and though some few of them conveyed a tolerable idea of the thing intended, yet even these were many degrees worse than our country sign-paintings in England.

When this piece of superstition was completed, we began to advance toward the Esquimaux tents; but were very careful to avoid crossing any hills, or talking loud, for fear of being seen or overheard by the inhabitants; by which means the distance was not only much greater than it otherwise would have been, but, for the sake of keeping in the lowest grounds, we were obliged to walk through entire swamps of

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stiff marly clay, sometimes up to the knees. Our course, however, on this occasion, though very serpentine, was not altogether so remote from the river as entirely to exclude me from a view of it the whole way: on the contrary, several times (according to the situation of the ground) we advanced so near it, as to give me an opportunity of convincing myself that it was as unnavigable as it was in those parts which I had surveyed before, and which entirely corresponded with the accounts given of it by the spies.

It is perhaps worth remarking, that my crew, though an undisciplined rabble, and by no means accustomed to war or command, seemingly acted on this horrid occasion with the utmost uniformity of sentiment. There was not among them the least altercation or separate opinion; all were united in the general cause, and as ready to follow where Matonabbee led, as he appeared to be ready to lead, according to the advice of an old Copper Indian, who had joined us on our first arrival at the river where this bloody business was first proposed.

Never was reciprocity of interest more generally regarded among a number of people, than it was on the present occasion by my crew, for not one was a moment in want of any thing that another could spare; and if ever the spirit of disinterested friendship expanded the heart of a Northern Indian, it was here exhibited in the most extensive meaning of the word. Property of every kind that could be of general use now ceased to be private, and every one who had any thing which came under that description, seemed proud of an opportunity of giving it, or lending it to those who had none, or were most in want of it.

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The number of my crew was so much greater than that which five tents could contain, and the warlike manner in which they were equipped so greatly superior to what could be expected of the poor Esquimaux, that no less than a total massacre of every one of them was likely to be the case, unless Providence should work a miracle for their deliverance.

The land was so situated that we walked under cover of the rocks and hills till we were within two hundred yards of the tents. There we lay in ambush for some time, watching the motions of the Esquimaux; and here the Indians would have advised me to stay till the fight was over, but to this I could by no means consent; for I considered that when the Esquimaux came to be surprised, they would try every way to escape, and if they found me alone, not knowing me from an enemy, they would probably proceed to violence against me when no person was near to assist. For this reason I determined to accompany them, telling them at the same time, that I would not have any hand in the murder they were about to commit, unless I found it necessary for my own safety. The Indians were not displeased at this proposal; one of them immediately fixed me a spear, and another lent me a broad bayonet for my protection, but at that time I could not be provided with a

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target; nor did I want to be encumbered with such an unnecessary piece of lumber.

While we lay in ambush, the Indians performed the last ceremonies which were thought necessary before the engagement. These chiefly consisted in painting their faces; some all black, some all red, and others with a mixture of the two; and to prevent their hair from blowing into their eyes, it was either tied before and behind, and on both sides, or else cut short all round. The next thing they considered was to make themselves as light as possible for running; which they did, by pulling off their stockings, and either cutting off the sleeves of their jackets, or rolling them up close to their arm-pits; and though the musket-toes at that time were so numerous as to surpass all credibility, yet some of the Indians actually pulled off their jackets and entered the lists quite naked, except their breech-cloths and shoes. Fearing I might have occasion to run with the rest, I thought it also advisable to pull off my stockings and cap, and to tie my hair as close up as possible.

By the time the Indians had made themselves thus completely frightful, it was near one o'clock in the morning of the seventeenth; when finding all the Esquimaux quiet in their tents, they rushed forth from their ambuscade, and fell on the poor unsuspecting creatures, unperceived till close at the very eves of their tents, when they soon began the bloody massacre, while I stood neuter in the rear.

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In a few seconds the horrible scene commenced; it was shocking beyond description; the poor unhappy victims were surprised in the midst of their sleep, and had neither time nor power to make any resistance; men, women, and children, in all upwards of twenty, ran out of their tents stark naked, and endeavoured to make their escape; but the Indians having possession of all the land-side, to no place could they fly for shelter. One alternative only remained, that of jumping into the river; but, as none of them attempted it, they all fell a sacrifice to Indian barbarity!

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The shrieks and groans of the poor expiring wretches were truly dreadful; and my horror was much increased at seeing a young girl, seemingly about eighteen years of age, killed so near me, that when the first spear was stuck into her side she fell down at my feet, and twisted round my legs, so that it was with difficulty that I could disengaged myself from her dying grasps. As two Indian men pursued this unfortunate victim, I solicited very hard for her life; but the murderers made no reply till they had stuck both their spears through her body, and transfixed her to the ground. They then looked me sternly in the face, and began to ridicule me, by asking if I wanted an Esquimaux wife; and paid not the smallest regard to the shrieks and agony of the poor wretch, who was twining round their spears like an eel! Indeed, after receiving much abusive language from them on the occasion, I was at length obliged to desire that they would be more expeditious in dispatching

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their victim out of her misery, otherwise I should be obliged, out of pity, to assist in the friendly office of putting an end to the existence of a fellow-creature who was so cruelly wounded. On this request being made, one of the Indians hastily drew his spear from the place where it was first lodged, and pierced it through her breast near the heart. The love of life, however, even in this most miserable state, was so predominant, that though this might justly be called the most merciful act that could be done for the poor creature, it seemed to be unwelcome, for though much exhausted by pain and loss of blood, she made several efforts to ward off the friendly blow. My situation and the terror of my mind at beholding this butchery, cannot easily be conceived, much less described; though I summed up all the fortitude I was master of on the occasion, it was with difficulty that I could refrain from tears; and I am confident that my features must have feelingly expressed how sincerely I was affected at the barbarous scene I then witnessed; even at this hour I cannot reflect on the transactions of that horrid day without shedding tears.

The brutish manner in which these savages used the bodies they had so cruelly bereaved of life was so shocking, that it would be indecent to describe it; particularly their curiosity in examining, and the remarks they made, on the formation of the women; which, they pretended to say, differed materially from that of their own. For my own part I must acknowledge, that however favourable the opportunity for determining that point might have been, yet my thoughts at the time were too much agitated to admit of any such remarks; and I firmly believe, that had there actually been as much difference between them as there is said to be between the Hottentots and those of Europe, it would not have been in my power to have marked the distinction. I have reason to think, however, that there is no ground for the assertion; and really believe that the declaration of the Indians on this occasion, was utterly void of truth, and proceeded only from the implacable hatred they bore to the whole tribe of people of whom I am speaking.

When the Indians had completed the murder to the poor Esquimaux, seven other tents on the East side [of] the river immediately engaged their attention: very luckily, however, our canoes and baggage had been left at a little distance up the river, so that they had no way of crossing to get at them. The river at this part being little more than eighty yards wide, they began firing at them from the West side. The poor Esquimaux on the opposite shore, though all up in arms, did not attempt to abandon their tents; and they were so unacquainted with the nature of fire-arms, that when the bullets struck the ground, they ran in crowds to see what was sent them, and seemed anxious to examine all the pieces of lead which they found flattened against the rocks. At length one of the Esquimaux men was shot in the calf of his leg, which put them in great confusion. They all immediately embarked in their little canoes, and paddled to a shoal in the middle of the river, which being somewhat more than a gun-shot from any part of the shore, put them out of the reach of our barbarians.

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When the savages discovered that the surviving Esquimaux had gained the shore above mentioned, the Northern Indians began to plunder the tents of the deceased of all the copper utensils they could find; such as hatchets, bayonets, knives, &c. after which they assembled on the top of an adjacent high hill, and standing all in a cluster, so as to form a solid circle, with their spears erect in the air, gave many shouts of victory, constantly clashing their spears against each other, and frequently calling out *tima! tima!*² by way of derision to the poor surviving Esquimaux, who were standing on the shoal almost knee-deep in water. After parading the hill for some time, it was agreed to return up the river to the place where we had left our canoes and baggage, which was about half a mile distant, and then to cross the river again and plunder the seven tents on the East side. This resolution was immediately put in force; and as ferrying across with only three or four canoes³ took a considerable time, and as we were, from the crookedness of the river and the form of the land, entirely under cover, several of the poor surviving Esquimaux, thinking probably that we were gone about our business, and meant to trouble them no more, had returned from the shoal to their habitations. When we approached their tents, which we did under cover of the rocks, we found them busily employed tying up bundles. These the Indians seized with their usual ferocity; on which, the Esquimaux having their canoes lying ready in the water, immediately embarked, and all of them got safe to the former shoal, except an old man, who was so intent on collecting his things, that the Indians coming upon him before he could reach his canoe, he fell a sacrifice to their fury: I verily believe not less than twenty had a hand in his death, as his whole body was like a cullender. It is here necessary to observe that the spies, when on the look-out, could not see these seven tents, though close under them, as the bank, on which they stood, stretched over them.

It ought to have been mentioned in its proper place, that in making our retreat up the river, after killing the Esquimaux on the West side, we saw an old woman sitting by the side of the water, killing salmon, which lay at the foot of the fall as thick as a shoal of herrings. Whether from the noise of the fall, or a natural defect in the old woman's hearing, it is hard to determine, but certain it is, she had no knowledge of the tragical scene which had been so lately transacted at the tents, though she was not more than two hundred yards from the place. When we first perceived her, she seemed perfectly at ease, and was entirely surrounded with the produce of her labour. From her manner of behaviour, and the appearance of her eyes, which were as red as blood, it is more than probable that her sight was not very good; for she scarcely discerned that the Indians were enemies, till they were within twice the length of their spears of her. It was in vain that she attempted to fly, for the wretches of my crew transfixed her to the ground in a few seconds, and butchered her in the most savage manner. There was scarcely a man among them who had not a thrust at her with his spear; and many in doing this, aimed at torture, rather than immediate death, as they not only poked out her eyes, but stabbed her in many parts very remote from those which are vital.

It may appear strange, that a person supposed to be almost blind should be employed in the business of fishing, and particularly with any degree of success; but when the multitude of fish is taken into the account, the wonder will cease. Indeed they were so numerous at the foot of the fall, that when a light pole, armed with a few spikes, which was the instrument the old woman used, was put under water, and hauled up with a jerk, it was scarcely possible to miss them. Some of my Indians tried the method, for curiosity, with the old woman's staff, and seldom got less than two at a jerk, sometimes three or four. Those fish, though very fine, and beautifully red, are but small, seldom weighing more (as near as I could judge) than six or seven pounds, and in general much less. Their numbers at this place were almost incredible, perhaps equal to any thing that is related of the salmon in Kamschatka, or any other part of the world. It does not appear that the Esquimaux have any other method of catching the fish, unless it be by spears and darts; for no appearance of nets was discovered either at their tents, or on any part of the shore. This is the case with all the Esquimaux on the West side of Hudson's Bay; spearing in Summer, and angling in Winter, are the only methods they have yet devised to catch fish, though at times their whole dependance for support is on that article.

July

When the Indians had plundered the seven tents of all copper utensils, which seemed the only thing worth their notice, they threw all the tents and tent-poles into the river, destroyed a vast quantity of dried salmon, musk-oxen flesh, and other provisions; broke all the stone kettles; and, in fact, did all the mischief they possibly could to distress the poor creatures they could not murder, and who were standing on the shoal before mentioned, obliged to be woeful spectators of their great, or perhaps irreparable loss.

1771.
July

[Beaver Dunging]

In respect to the beaver dunging in their houses, as some persons assert, it is quite wrong, as they always plunge into the water to do it. I am the better enabled to make this assertion, from having kept several of them till they became so domesti-cated as to answer to their name, and follow those to whom they were accustomed, in the same manner as a dog would do; and they were as much pleased at being fondled, as any animal I ever saw. I had a house built for them, and a small piece of water before the door, into which they always plunged when they wanted to ease nature; and their dung being of a light substance, immediately rises and floats on the surface, then separates and subsides to the bottom. When the Winter sets in so as to freeze the water solid, they still continue their custom of coming out of their house, and dunging and making water on the ice; and when the weather was so cold that I was obliged to take them into my house, they always went into a large tub of water which I set for that purpose: so that they made not

1771.
December

the least dirt, though they were kept in my own sitting-room, where they were the constant companions of the Indian women and children, and were so fond of their company, that when the Indians were absent for any considerable time, the beaver discovered great signs of uneasiness, and on their return shewed equal marks of pleasure, by fondling on them, crawling into their laps, laying on their backs, sitting erect like a squirrel, and behaving to them like children who see their parents but seldom. In general, during the Winter they lived on the same food as the women did, and were remarkably fond of rice and plum-pudding: they would eat partridges and fresh venison very freely, but I never tried them with fish, though I have heard they will at times prey on them.



Samuel Hearne, "A Winter View in the Athapuscow Lake" (1771)

Notes

1. I have seen two Northern Indians who measured six feet three inches; and one, six feet four inches.[\[back\]](#)
2. *Tima* in the Esquimaux language is a friendly word similar to *what cheer!*[\[back\]](#)
3. When the fifteen Indians turned back at the Stony Mountains, they took two or three canoes with them; some of our crew that were sent ahead as messengers had not yet returned, which occasioned the number of our canoes to be so small.[\[back\]](#)

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