Breeds And Half-Breeds

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MATONABBEE AND SAMUEL HEARNE

1736?–1770

MATONABBEE, probably the greatest of all the Indian interpreter-guides, was born into this Company society about 1736. His father was a Chipewyan, and his mother a slave girl bought from the Southern Indians on one of their trading trips to Fort Prince of Wales.

The romanticists claim that Richard Norton, Company governor at the Fort, arranged the match, but since the Chipewyans had no marriage ceremony it is difficult to see how the legend got started.

Matonabbee's mother remained close to the Fort, and the little fellow became a favorite at the "Big House," as the home of the governor was called. When Matonabbee's father died, soon after the baby was born, Norton adopted the boy. Later, when Norton went to England, Chipewyan relatives came to the Fort and took Matonabbee away with them to roam the Barren Grounds.

On these mighty Barren Grounds, Matonabbee learned how to survive in the midst of 400,000 square miles of permafrost extending hundreds of feet into the earth, yet with the greatest recorded temperature range of any place on the continent: −87 degrees in winter and 100 degrees in summer. During the hot season the earth may thaw out enough to support a few spears of stunted grass, a thin sod of edible moss, or some scrubby willows surrounded by mile after mile of bare rocks across which howl and slash the northern gales.

It is a dismal and forbidding land, but one with its own charm, nevertheless: a land where for a few days each year ptarmigan by the thousands nest their young, where the white Arctic fox pads up and down hunting his prey, where an old snowy owl blinks in the sun and pounces on a mouse, where herds of caribou cross on their annual migrations, where shaggy musk-oxen stand silently and stare stupidly

at an approaching hunter, where hordes of stinging insects challenge one's sanity; a land where a solitary wolf stalks the crippled or old, where golden eagles soar but have never been known to nest, where uncounted geese gossip and raise their kind, and where still pass, in minute flocks, the whooping cranes.

But for all this, it was, and still is, the Barren Grounds, a place essentially unfit for human habitation where both man and beast must know the law, a place to avoid if possible and endure if need be.

Matonabbee stayed with his people until he was sixteen. By then he was almost six feet tall, well in excess of other Chipewyans, and this gave him a social position which he exploited to its fullest extent. But he was neither braggart nor bully. His modesty and kindly disposition were often remarked upon, and by the time he reached maturity he was probably the best-known and most popular Indian between the Churchill River and the Arctic. And this favorable position was as solid with the whites as with the natives.

About this time Ferdinand Jacobs became governor at Fort Prince of Wales, and he hired Matonabbee as a hunter. For the next several years, the big Chipewyan served in and about the Fort. He worked under Moses Norton, Richard Norton's half-breed son, who in time was to become the Fort's most notorious governor; he sailed under Magnus Johnston on trading trips up and down the western coast of Hudson Bay; he mastered the language of the Southern Indians and picked up a working knowledge of English and a smattering of Christianity, although this last did not impress Matonabbee greatly. He was, he said, an unbeliever and would leave this world as he came into it, without religion.

But his acts belied his words, and he gave respect to all religions, Christian and pagan. Years later, Samuel Hearne said that

> Notwithstanding his aversion for religion, I have met with few Christians who possessed more good moral qualities, or fewer bad ones. Matonabbee . . . could tell a better story of our Savior's birth and life, than one half of those who call themselves Christian; yet he always declared to me, that neither he, nor any of his countrymen, had an idea of a future state. . . . I have seen him several times assist at some of the sacred rites performed by the Southern Indians, apparently with as much zeal, as if he had given as much credit to them as they did: and . . . I am persuaded [he would] have assisted at the altar of a Christian church, or Jewish synagogue; not

. . . to reap any advantage to himself, but . . . to assist others who believed in such ceremonies.[1]

Matonabbee was strictly honest, due allowance being made for the mores of his people. He loved Spanish wines but seldom drank to excess. His table manners were exceptionally good, and the story is told that he would set one of his wives to rounding up the vermin which always infested their hairy undergarments and that he would "receive them with both hands, and lick them in as fast and with as good grace as any European epicure would the mites in a cheese."[2]

Of course Matonabbee was not perfect. He could and did commit acts of jealous rage that should shame any human. And he had a well-developed sense of acquisitiveness which led him to exploit his friends and foes with equally gay imperturbability.

By the time Matonabbee reached manhood, intertribal warfare and the English-French struggles were seriously interfering with Hudson's Bay Company business. Governor Jacobs took advantage of Matonabbee's knowledge and popularity, and sent him inland to straighten out several quarrels between the Chipewyans and their neighbors.

On the first of these expeditions, Matonabbee was in danger of suffering the torture-death routine common to American Indians. These ceremonies always involved a long-drawn-out foreplay on the part of the captors, boasting all sorts of past and future acts with emphasis on how they were going to make the present captive squirm. Matonabbee put up with this procedure for what he considered a reasonable length of time and then roared his tormentors down. He was tired of this nonsense, he said. If they were going to kill him, they should either get about it or keep still.

This was most unorthodox. Captives were supposed to remain stoically quiet, and stoically accept the torch and spear. A tongue-lashing from the victim was unheard of. He must indeed have powerful medicine! It so astounded the braves around the fire they set Matonabbee free, and he went about his business of adjusting intertribal troubles.

The following year almost the identical experience took place with another band, and again Matonabbee said that if that was the way it was to be, they should get at it. From that day on, Matonabbee was never personally in danger from the interior tribes. He remained their

friend and master through many years and over thousands of miles of their nomadic domain.

The land was always incredible and often frightening, but the factors at the Company posts hoped to make a fortune from it for the "Gentlemen Adventurers" of London. And contrary to the popular opinion of our day, both sides of the Atlantic were willing to achieve that affluence in ways other than fur trading if such a policy offered more profit.

The Great Company on Hudson Bay bought and sold many things, ranging from furs and whale oil to wild goose quills for London secretaries. And for many years it had been interested in tales brought by the Chipewyans of fabulous copper deposits to be found on a water far to the north and west. Samples of the ore made it almost impossible not to equate these stories with the Myth of Anian. What could be grander than to find the Northwest Passage surrounded by copper?

In time these tales of Anian and copper became so intermixed it was impossible to separate them. The Indians, wishing to curry favor and not in the least understanding the vision of a Northwest Passage, readily admitted that the mines were on a great waterway or river; wishful thinking made the white man believe that the mines were located on Anian; and so the search for copper somehow became the search for the Coppermine River, the Coppermine River became Anian, and it was left for time, Samuel Hearne, and Matonabbee to set it all straight.

In the meantime, Samuel Hearne reached manhood. He was born in London in 1745. His father was supervisor of the London waterworks close by London Bridge on the Thames. On the death of the elder Hearne, Samuel's mother moved to her girlhood home, Beaminster, where she put young Samuel and his sister in school. But Samuel was not very happy. He begged to leave school, and was finally apprenticed at age eleven to the great Captain Hood of the Royal British Navy.

Samuel saw service in the Seven Years' War, sailed widely in European waters, and seemed on the way to becoming a well-liked, sturdy English naval man when he suddenly resigned and hired out to the Hudson's Bay Company on February 12, 1766. He was sent to Fort Prince of Wales and assigned duty on the sloop *Churchill* at a salary of £25 per annum.

Hearne was a tall, handsome Englishman with a desire to make a name for himself and "benefit mankind," as he put it. He was slow in maturing and was often considered indolent and without ambition. He was neither, but he was too soft-hearted for his own good and was generally imposed upon by others.

Nevertheless, he had a way with him. By the time he arrived on the Churchill River, Moses Norton, able, half-breed, debauchee son of Richard Norton who had adopted Matonabbee, was governor of Fort Prince of Wales. It was not long before Hearne had induced Norton to recommend that since the interior northwest of the Fort had never been explored and no white man had ever reached the American Arctic by land, Hearne should be allowed to enter that region and seek Anian and the copper mines, for the purposes of improving Company finances and perhaps allaying the criticisms fostered by Arthur Dobbs.

The Company agreed, providing the expense was limited to two or three men who were to travel with the Indians and live off the country. Hearne accepted these restrictions, and the First Coppermine Expedition got under way the beginning of the winter of 1769.

Hearne had the usual instructions: send reports; take samples of the flora, fauna, and soil; make peace with the Indians; establish commercial intercourse; and find Anian and the mines.

The inadequacy of Hearne's personal preparations are almost unbelievable: "I took only the clothes I then had on, one spare coat, a pair of drawers, and as much cloth as would make me two or three pairs of Indian stockings, which, together with a blanket for bedding, composed the whole of my stock of clothing."[3] And Samuel Hearne was heading into the sub-Arctic at the beginning of winter!

He and two white companions managed to get a few days away from the Churchill before they were robbed of their goods and deserted by the Indians. They trudged back to the Fort.

Norton agreed to a second trip, and Hearne started west alone, except for his Indian companions, on the morning of February 23, 1770. This time he got as far as the southern edge of Aberdeen Lake before an accident to his quadrant plus another pillaging by his Indians caused him to turn about once more, defeated.

Hearne started home with a band of semifriendly Indians, but he was in sore straits. It was winter. Temperatures were often far below the limits safe for human survival, and he had neither clothes nor

Samuel Hearne. From a portrait published after his death. *Champlain Society*.

snowshoes and was using a single blanket thrown around three poles for a tent.

There were many Indian women in the band with which Hearne was now traveling, but they would not work without pay and he had no goods with which to hire them. He was therefore alone for all practical purposes. He could have died from exposure, starved to death, or been killed by accident, and no Indian would have turned a hand to rescue him. It was the code.

It is difficult to see how Hearne could have survived longer without help. His present companions' sole interest was collecting hides for their winter wardrobe, and they were not going to share anything with a stranger. Copper mines could wait, and the Strait of Anian was far beyond their simple understanding.

There is a storybook tinge to the fact that just when one more night without adequate shelter might have ended the life of Samuel Hearne, the Chipewyan Matonabbee drifted into camp on September 20, 1770. He greeted Hearne, whom he had seen at Fort Prince of Wales many times, and his old Indian friends, and immediately took charge of the whole situation. He ordered his own women to make clothes, prepare food, and arrange for a tent for Hearne at once. That done, the two men sat down to compare notes.

Hearne told of his two failures, and Matonabbee agreed that the trouble was a lack of women to do the work.

"Women," said he, "were made for labour. They . . . 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 . . . are maintained at trifling expense; for as they always stand cook, the very licking of their fingers . . . is sufficient for their subsistence."[4]

After further talk, Matonabbee asked Hearne what he proposed to do. Did he intend to make a third trip?

Hearne was now suffering the truth of the threadbare axiom that experience brings maturity. The obvious disdain of the Indians and his two failures had brought him up sharply against his own weaknesses. He knew that if he was ever going to "make a name for himself," he must be about it; he must lay aside some of his philosophy of gentle persuasion and permit the stubborn determination of which he was capable to take over the direction of his career.

This change of emphasis appears to have been somewhat sudden. So far in his life Hearne had plodded along in the shadow of whatever event was leading him, content to take success or failure without elation or complaint. Now he donned a new coat and boasted that he would forfeit his life rather than give up the search for Anian. This was the kind of talk the big Chipewyan understood, and the upshot of the evening's powwow was a lifelong friendship between the native and the polished Englishman.

Matonabbee had traversed most of the region west and north of Fort Prince of Wales as far as the continental divide and the Arctic; he had been to the copper mines with I-dat-le-aza, another Indian leader, in 1769, the year of Hearne's first trip; he had reported this trip to Norton, and was still at the post when Hearne left on his initial journey. Why Norton did not send Matonabbee on that first expedition will probably never be known.

In any event, Matonabbee now offered to help Hearne return to the Churchill River, appease Norton if necessary, and organize a third expedition, and to go with him to seek copper and Anian once more.

Willows for snowshoes and sleds were the first essentials, however, and Matonabbee told Hearne where they could be found. Then the two men coasted along toward the Fort, sometimes together, sometimes apart. Hearne was able to travel faster than the Indians with families, and when weather conditions worsened Matonabbee urged him to hurry ahead, make his peace with Norton, and say that Matonabbee would arrive in a few days.

Such was the juncture of the fortunes of Matonabbee, Samuel Hearne, and the myth of the Strait of Anian.

Chapter 3. Matonabbee and Samuel Hearne

1. Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean in the Years 1769, 1770, 1771, and 1772*, ed. J. B. Tyrrell, Toronto, Champlain Society, 1911, pp. 325–326, 329.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 102.