The Hudson Bay Company sought workers from pre-industrial societies who would accept the traditional master-servant relationship. To a large extent they did. In fact, these workers never questioned this central tenet of the HBC hierarchy. They did, however, bargain for higher wages, refuse to work under intolerable and dangerous conditions, object to unfair treatment by au The Hudson Bay Company sought workers from pre-industrial societies who would accept the traditional master-servant relationship. To a large extent they did. In fact, these workers never questioned this central tenet of the HBC hierarchy. They did, however, bargain for higher wages, refuse to work under intolerable and dangerous conditions, object to unfair treatment by

Work, discipline and conflict in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1770 to 1870

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Abstract:
The Hudson's Bay Company is usually seen as a group of explorers and fur traders, an image reinforced by fur trade historians who focus on officers, native-European relations, women, and "fur trade society," while paying scant attention to the majority of the HBC's men who were labourers and tradesmen. The notion that trading posts resembled traditional households in which subordinate members were subsumed has come to dominate the discussion of HBC employees, thereby relegating them to the margins of Canadian history. Labour historians tend to ignore the HBC altogether. But, the posts and ships of the HBC were workplaces and, therefore, "contested terrain," as indeed was the pre-industrial household itself. The assumption, shared by the London committee and fur trade historians, that order and subordination were the norm in such traditional settings means that conflict and disobedience are considered almost aberrant and attributed to ethnic peculiarities. The HBC has thus come to be seen as a monolithic, paternalistic organization in which all members were united in a mentalité characteristic of the harmonious, pre-industrial society from which most of them were drawn. However, pre-industrial social relations were negotiated, not imposed from the top. This thesis rests on the assumption that such negotiation occurred in the HBC and explores this relationship for the period 1770-1870, a century of drastic change for the company. The HBC's archives preserve the journals, logs, and reports of unusual events, which officers and ships' captains had to submit, correspondence between them and the London committee, letters from HBC recruiters, petitions from servants asking for assistance or demanding justice, and a variety of personal letters. These records document the behaviour and views of both officers and servants and reveal that conflict was very much a part of life in the HBC. Regardless of ethnicity and like other workers, HBC men negotiated the terms of their engagements, retained customs and habits their superiors abandoned, engaged in private trade, were frequently disobedient and defiant, tried to control the pace and conditions of their work, and acted collectively to increase wages or oppose unfair treatment.

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