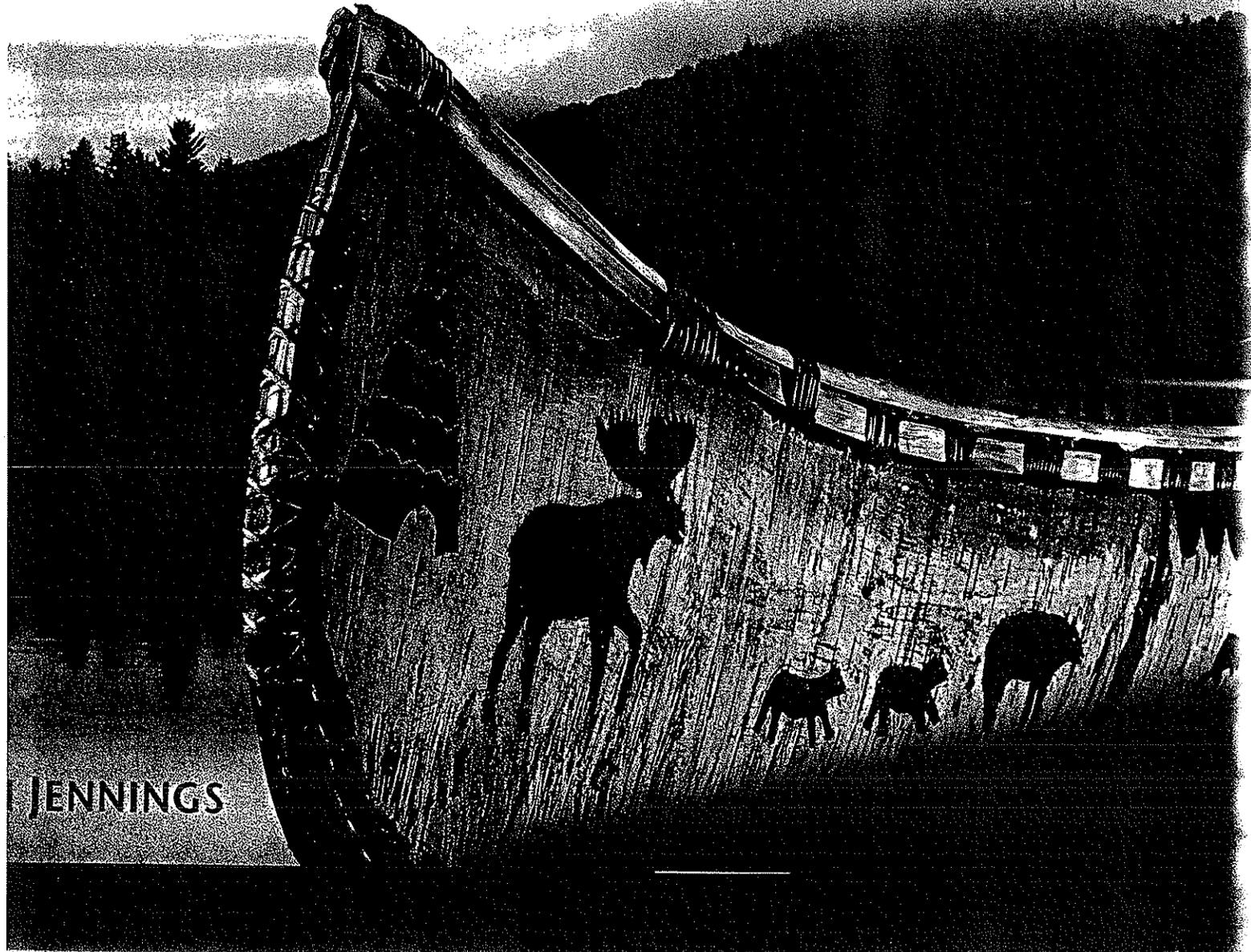


The CANOE

A LIVING TRADITION

Verde 037



JENNINGS

The CANOE

A LIVING TRADITION

Conceived by John Jennings

With contributions from

Eugene Arima

Hallie E. Bond

Steven C. Brown

David Finch

Don Gardner

Gwyneth Hoyle

C. Fred Johnston

Kenneth R. Lister

Ted Moores

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FIREFLY BOOKS



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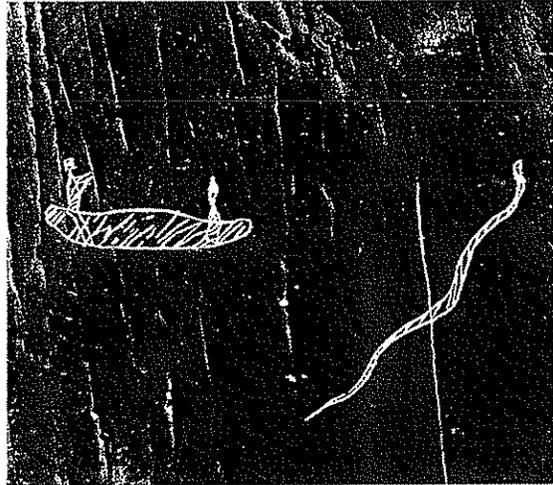
much of the region were to create a very different set of dynamics for the French colonizers than was the case in most of the hemisphere. In the St. Lawrence Valley, as historian Donald Creighton pointed out, agriculture “struggled with an ineffectual persistence against the lures of the fur trade.” Initially, instead of coveting the land, the French quickly accommodated themselves to the existing Native patterns of hunting and trade and soon exploited the region’s foremost economic opportunity—the trade in furs.

For at least twenty thousand years, this had been a region of hunters. Agriculture did exist here and there below the southern limit of the Shield, but usually it augmented hunting, trapping and fishing. Certainly the Huron, Petun, Neutral and Odawa (Ottawa) of southern Ontario practiced extensive agriculture, as did the Iroquois of the Great Lakes region, growing corn, beans, squash and tobacco, but they were in the minority in a vast land of dense forests and waterways that determined that commerce and communication were mostly by water.

Because of this geography, which covered most of the region except for the northern extension of the Great Plains, travel was mostly by soft water in summer and by hard water in winter. In the open season, the bark canoe was the principal means of communication and trade across the continent. In winter, the same river routes were used with snowshoe and toboggan.

Archeological evidence shows that articles such as obsidian, used for making tools, traveled over great distances, probably by canoe, and was traded from one people to another. There were, for instance, very elaborate canoe trading systems in the eastern part of the continent, ranging from the Mi’kmaq and Maliseet on the east coast to the land beyond the Great Lakes and from Hudson Bay to the Mississippi River.

When Europeans arrived in the northern part of the continent, they found ancient routes linking well established trade patterns across the continent and soon realized that in this region, the canoe was the defining element in Native life. It was clear to the early French explorers that the birchbark canoe was the ideal craft for the waterways of the continent. First Jacques Cartier in the 1530s and later Samuel de Champlain in the early 1600s found that heavy and awkward rowing craft were useless on the interior waterways of North America. It was essential to survival in the heart-stopping rapids of America’s rivers to have a craft that faced in the direction of travel and could maneuver easily. The lightness of birchbark was also a necessity on the frequent portages.



LEFT: A Mi’kmaq petroglyph (rock carving) from Fairy Bay, Kejimikujik National Park, Nova Scotia. Native petroglyphs and pictographs (rock paintings) are found across the continent and usually depict the culture and legends of the Native peoples. Those in Canada are often found along river routes.

BELOW: Today the territory of the hunter-gatherer peoples has shrunk, in most cases, to tiny sanctuaries. Only in Canada and Alaska, interior Australia and the Amazon rain forest of Brazil are there still significant hunting areas. Canada, with only five percent of its territory arable, and Alaska, with virtually no arable land, possess more hunting territory than all the rest of the world put together.



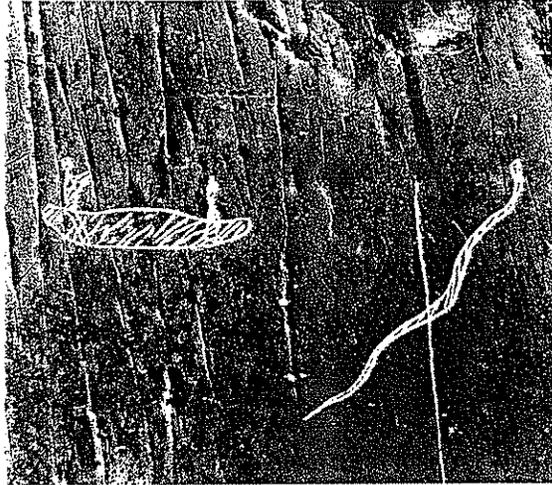
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TERRITORY OF THE HUNTER-GATHERER PEOPLES, CIRCA 2000

socially, politically and economically into small units, based on kinship, egalitarianism and a division of labor between the sexes. Larger units could not function in hunting cultures. Gatherings of related groups usually took place in the summer at some traditional canoe stopping place for trading and socializing.

The map of North American hunting societies mirrors the map of the range of the birch tree and again emphasizes why this one area of the world has a special relationship with the canoe. It was not happenstance that when the Native craft was transformed into its European counterpart in the mid-nineteenth century, it developed in Peterborough, where the European farming frontier met the country of the Canadian Shield, and in the rugged country at the lower limits of the hunters' world in Maine and New Brunswick, and in a band below the Great Lakes from the Adirondacks of New York State to Minnesota.

The Birchbark Canoe

We owe most of our knowledge of the bark canoes of this region to one definitive book, Tappan Adney's *The Bark Canoes and Skin Bouts of North America*, the result of a lifetime of research. Adney's voluminous notes and a preliminary partial draft were turned into the bible of the bark canoe after his death by Howard Chapelle, Curator of Transportation at the Smithsonian Institution.

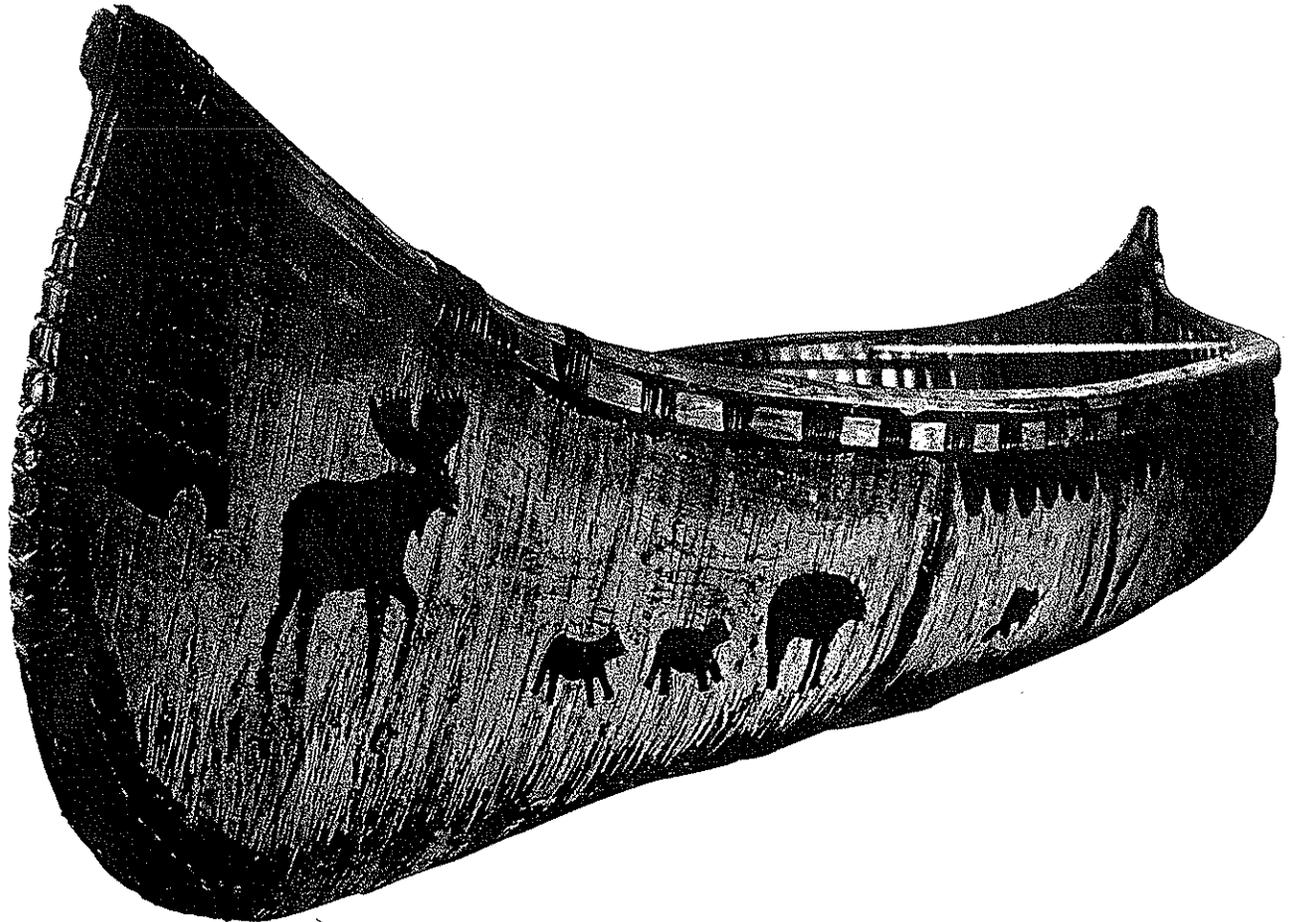
Adney's papers contain a fascinating discussion of bark canoe types around the world. He found archeological evidence that birchbark craft had existed in western and northern Europe during the Stone Age. He claimed that bark canoes were found in only five other areas in the world: the land of the Ainu in Japan, the Amur Valley of Manchuria, the Orinoco River of Venezuela, Tierra del Fuego in Chile and Argentina, and Australia. He also mentioned a bark canoe that the explorer David Livingstone had seen in the Congo.

2
A Cree camp at Fort George, District of Ungava, 1902. Fort George, at the mouth of the Fort George River, is about halfway up the east side of James Bay. The teepee here is made of canvas, but birchbark continues to be used for building canoes. The canoe in the background is a "crooked canoe," very similar to the extreme modern "playboats" used for shooting rapids that most sane people would portage around. The crooked canoe was used in rivers with many rapids and also in the open water of James Bay, where the high ends could deflect waves. They were horrible to maneuver in wind.



The CANOE FRONTIER

JOHN JENNINGS



I cried out to God and began to pull my canoe toward me ... As for our Frenchmen, they did not fare any better, and several times were nearly lost.

Samuel de Champlain

Samuel de Champlain's entreaty to his deity was prompted by his first attempt, in 1613, to travel inland in the bark craft of the Native peoples. Specifically, he was asking for a bit of help in lining a canoe (pulling it on a rope) up a rather difficult rapid on the Ottawa River. His Algonquin allies had made it look easy, but his canoe had spun broadside in a whirlpool and "had I not luckily fallen between two rocks, the canoe would have dragged me in, since I could not quickly enough loosen the rope that

was twisted around my hand, which hurt me very much, and nearly cut it off ... Having escaped I gave praise to God, beseeching Him to preserve us." Actually Champlain's bemused Algonquin allies did the preserving, especially after Champlain next lost his astrolabe on a mosquito-infested portage a short time later. Fortunately, the Algonquins were patient tutors as the French bumbled their way into the interior. The French, on their part, quickly realized that they had much to learn if they were to venture west in a country where travel was only possible by water.

The canoe frontier of North America began with the French. As the European powers (the Spanish, Portuguese, English, Dutch and French) turned their attention to the New World after Columbus, the French

FACING PAGE: The Main Channel on the French River, used by fur traders to travel between Lake Nipissing and Georgian Bay.

ABOVE: Algonquin birchbark, fourteen feet, eight inches long, thirty-four inches wide, built in the 1970s by William Commanda and his wife Mary at Maniwaki, Quebec. Maniwaki continues to be an important canoe building center. William Commanda is considered to be one of the greatest living canoe builders. In 1995 he was inducted into the Canadian Canoe Museum's Hall of Honour.

[We] tell you now the French never conquered us neither did they purchase a foot of our Country, nor have they a right to give it to you, we gave them liberty to settle for which they always rewarded us and treated us with great Civility while they had it in their power, but as they are become now your people, if you expect to keep these Posts, we will expect to have proper returns from you.

from *Warpaths* by Ian K. Steele

Pontiac's rebellion at its most fundamental level represented a lashing out by hunting societies, the trading allies of the French, against the encroachment of the American settlement frontier. These Native trading allies had been fundamental to the survival of New France when it was threatened by the Iroquois. Twice more, during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, they were crucial in saving Canada from American invasion. The irony in both cases was that many of the Mohawk, former implacable enemies of New France, now became Canada's ranking Native allies.

The French in the American West

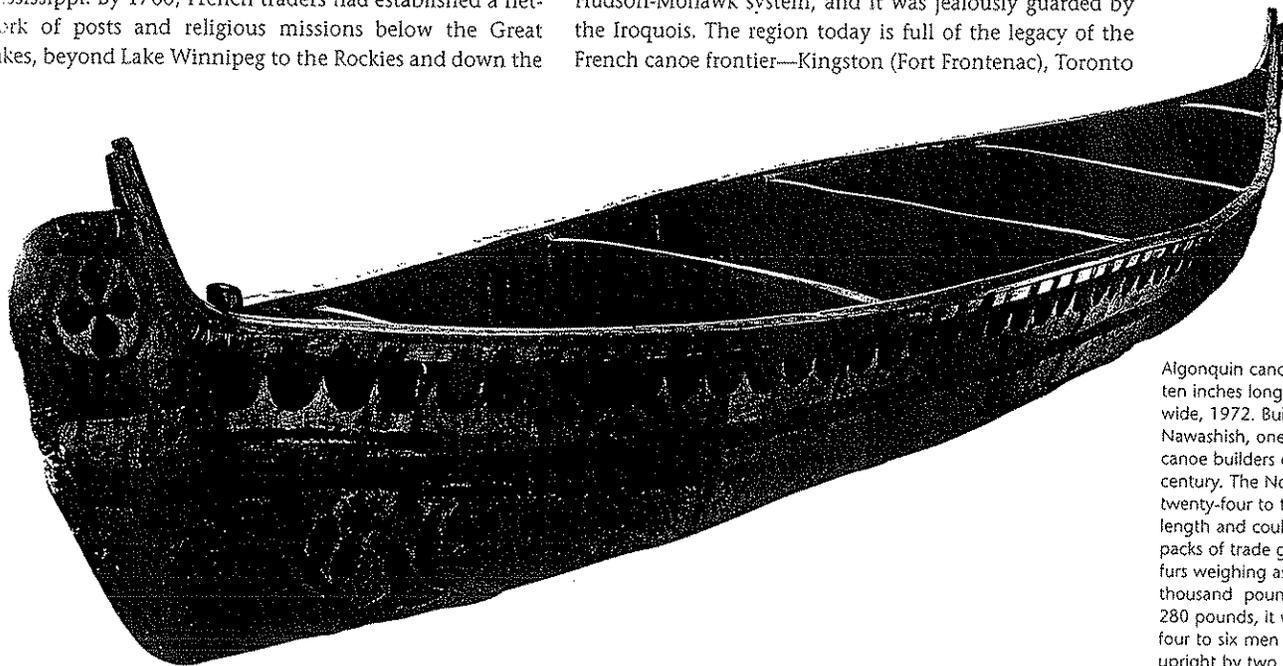
By the fall of New France in the middle of the eighteenth century, the trading territory that the French had incorporated in their canoe frontier included more than half the continent, based on the St. Lawrence and extending twenty-five hundred miles to the mouth of the Mississippi. By 1760, French traders had established a network of posts and religious missions below the Great Lakes, beyond Lake Winnipeg to the Rockies and down the



Mississippi to the Missouri River. At the same time, the French colony of Louisiana, established in the early eighteenth century, reinforced France's hold on all territory west of the Appalachian Mountains, from above the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico.

After Louisiana was established, the French managed to contain the English behind the Appalachians by building posts throughout the Ohio and Illinois country. The English had only one easy route to this country, the Hudson-Mohawk system, and it was jealously guarded by the Iroquois. The region today is full of the legacy of the French canoe frontier—Kingston (Fort Frontenac), Toronto

ABOVE: *Shooting the Rapids*, by Frances Anne Hopkins, 1879. This accurate painting records an actual descent of the Lachine Rapid west of Montreal in 1863 in a Montreal canoe manned by sixteen voyageurs. This forty-foot canoe is thought to be one of the largest fur trade canoes ever built. Frances Hopkins can be seen in the middle of the canoe with her husband Edward (with the beard).



Algonquin canoe, twenty-six feet, ten inches long, sixty-one inches wide, 1972. Built by Cesar Nawashish, one of the great bark canoe builders of the twentieth century. The North canoe was from twenty-four to twenty-eight feet in length and could carry thirty-five packs of trade goods, supplies or furs weighing as much as three thousand pounds. Weighing about 280 pounds, it was paddled by four to six men and was portaged upright by two men.

essentially unaltered. The Scots in the half century after the fall of New France filled in the rest of the map of northern North America. By 1793, Alexander Mackenzie, traveling by canoe, had completed European knowledge of the water routes to both the Arctic and the Pacific, thus extending the canoe frontier of North America from sea to sea. He was followed shortly by Simon Fraser and by the extraordinary wanderings of David Thompson, the Englishman who changed loyalties and joined the Scots of the North West Company. His explorations and surveys of North America surpassed all others in the field.

However, none of this would have been possible without the French, Metis and Native voyageurs and guides who should be acknowledged for their enormous contribution. The exploration and mapping of Canada, from the era of New France to the Geological Survey of Canada in the late nineteenth century, would not have been possible without them. After all, the ones who are remembered today (Mackenzie, Thompson and Fraser) sat in the middle of the canoe, rarely lifted a paddle or carried a pack and were lifted in and out of the canoes at portages so as not to get their feet wet.

The figure of the voyageur has been passed down to us through generations of folklore. Behind the image was a life of unrelenting work: fifty strokes a minute, thirty thousand strokes a day in the height of bug season, hernias at thirty and the ultimate in boring food. Yet there was another side. Father Pierre-François-Xavier Charlevoix's description in the 1740s could just as easily describe the voyageurs of the Geological Survey canoe explorations in the twentieth century.

The journeys they undertake; the fatigues they undergo; the dangers to which they expose themselves; and the

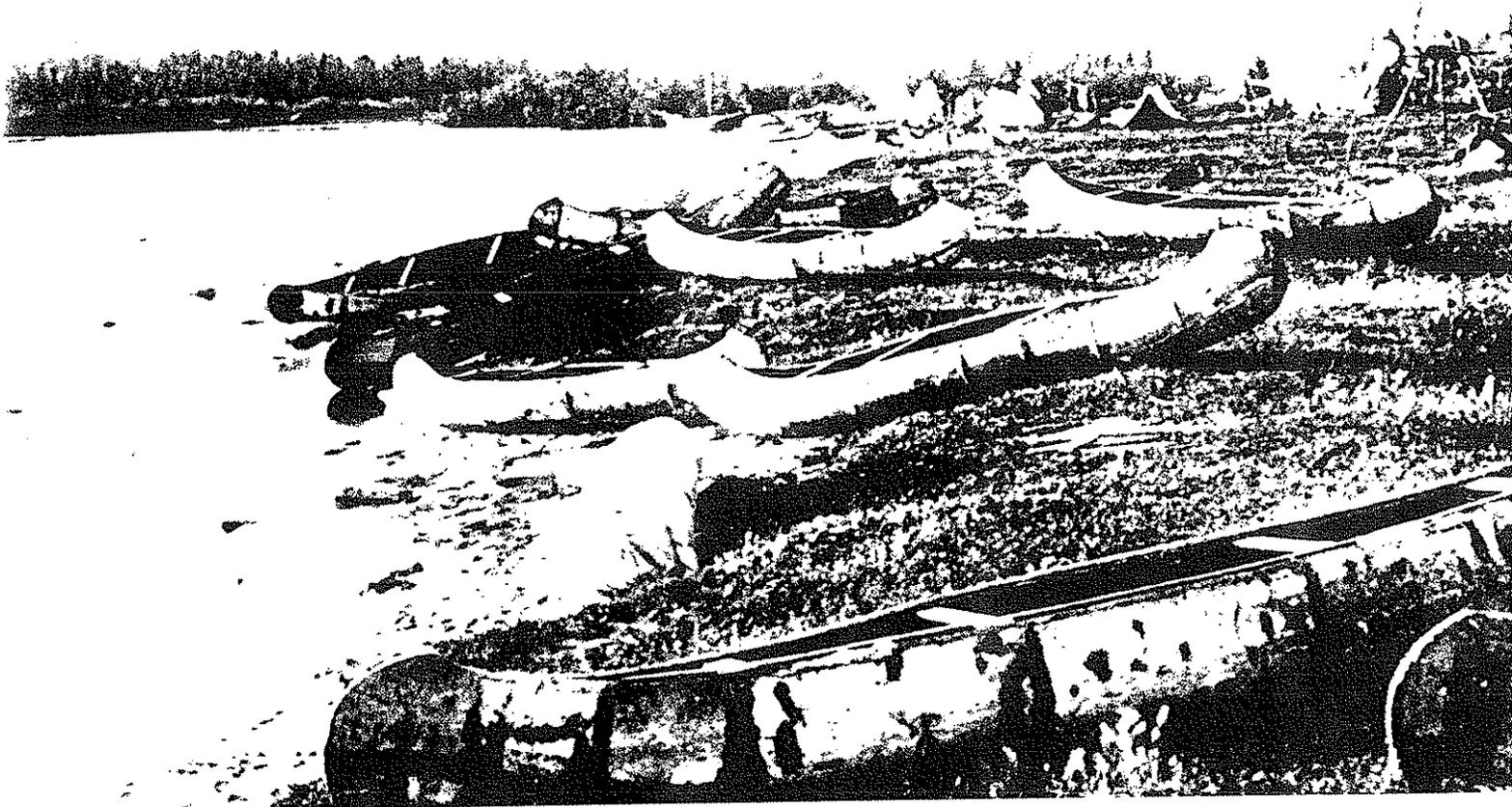
efforts they make surpass all imagination.... They love to breathe a free air, they are early accustomed to a wandering life; it has charms for them, which make them forget past dangers and fatigues, and they place their glory in encountering them often.... I know not whether I ought to reckon amongst the defects of our Canadians the good opinion they entertain of themselves. It is at least certain that it inspires them with a confidence, which leads them to undertake and execute what would appear impossible to many others.... It is alleged they make bad servants.

The Hudson's Bay Company was very much a latecomer on the canoe frontier. Although it was inaugurated in 1670 and claimed a vast exclusive trading territory, for more than a century the Honourable Company of Adventurers, as they called themselves, remained huddled on the frozen shores of Hudson and James Bay. It took aggressive competition from the Scots of the St. Lawrence fur trade in the late eighteenth century to budge them from their complacency. In theory the HBC had exclusive trading rights over all territory that drained into Hudson and James Bay, a vast territory which included much of northern Quebec and Ontario, most of the Canadian Plains to the Rocky Mountains and much of northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. But for over a century the Honourable Company was content to build posts on the Bay and wait for clients. Why should they venture inland when Native traders came to them, often from great distances?

This situation changed only when the Montreal traders were forced out of their traditional territory south of the Great Lakes after the American Revolution. Only then did the Nor'Westers stake their future on the far

Poling a voyaging canoe up the Abitibi River, 1905. Very few canoeists today travel up rivers, against the current. Voyageurs had no such luxury. They spent many exhausting days, dawn to dusk, traveling upstream, either zigzagging from one eddy to another, lining the craft from shore (pulling it upstream with a rope) or poling where the water was shallow enough to gain purchase with an iron-tipped pole. This can only be done standing and requires either a stable canoe or acrobatic ability.





An eastern Cree encampment at Oxford House, Manitoba, 1890. This photograph demonstrates in a striking way that Native peoples built very different canoes for different uses. The canoe with the extreme rocker (curve of the bottom line) was very responsive in rapids but would have been unstable on windy lakes. The canoes with long, flat bottoms performed well in rough open water, but were much harder to negotiate through rapids.

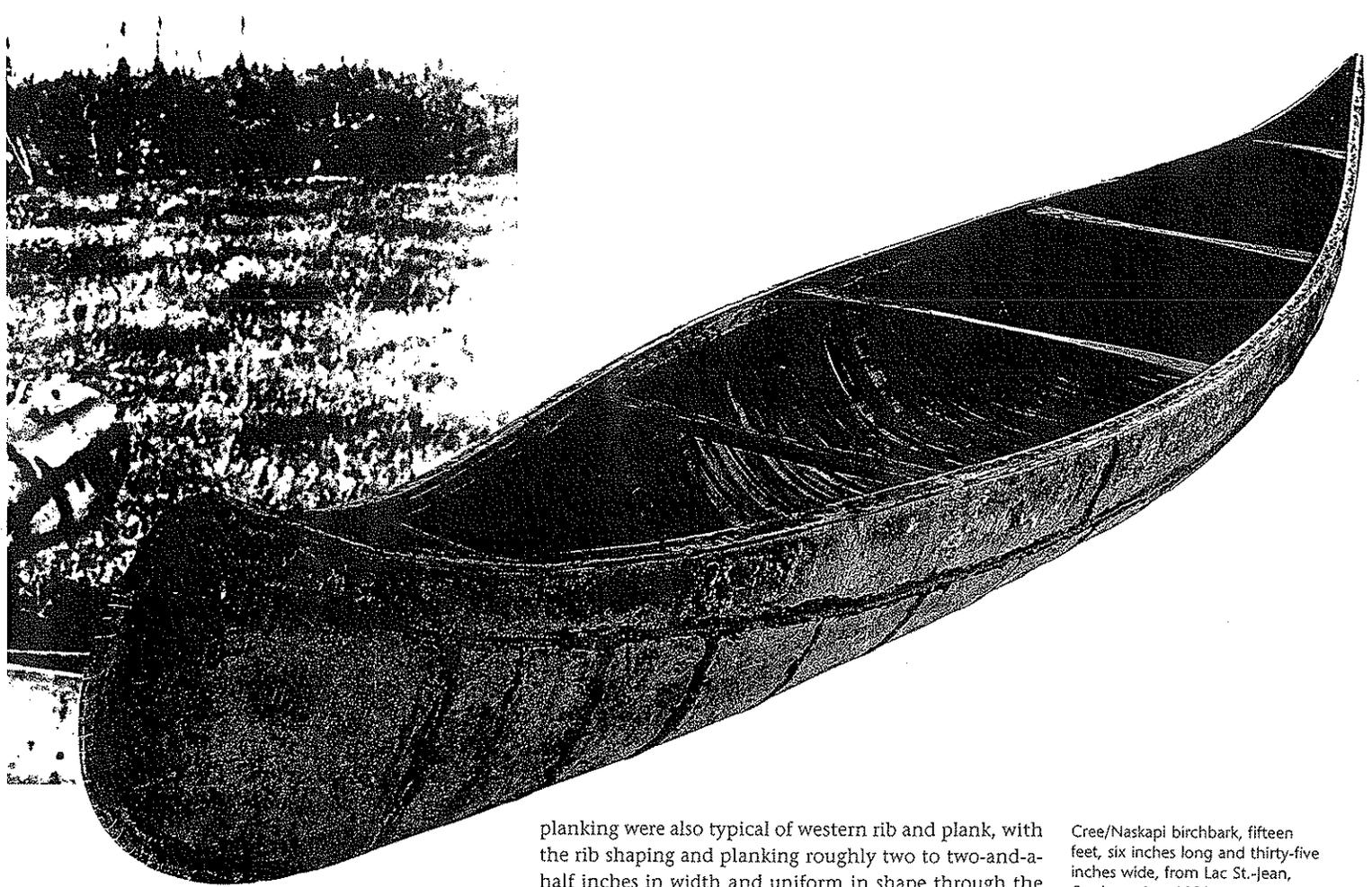
and techniques, as well as the selective use of steel tools, all of which would contribute to the hybrid canoe forms attributed to these bands and tribes.

Canoes built in the St. Francis region were generally the best examples of the hybrid forms in this area. Maliseet influence was somewhat evident in these craft (most likely related to the Penobscot), in that the canoe ends tapered sharply with neat pinching of the outwale and cap members, giving the craft a fine cutwater edge at the stems. The existence of finely molded hulls from uniform rib shaping, similar to most eastern birchbark canoes, was also apparent in the St. Francis canoes.

Canoes of the St. Francis River region were constructed using the western rib-and-plank system. This was the predominant construction form of the rib-and-plank birchbark canoe, with the sheathing and planks made in an overlap pattern set in the hull shell in three sections; ends first, then midship. Planks were thin splints of white cedar no more than one-sixteenth of an inch thick, with their ends either rounded or pointed in shape. They were of short lengths, reaching roughly from crossbar to crossbar (thwarts pairs) on each

position past the center, and from these to the inside stems. When set in place, the planking edges, which were shaved or planed to a paper edge, overlapped the adjoining plank by approximately one-half to one inch. The rib shaping was narrow, similar to that of the rib and frame components of the eastern canoe builders. Canoe ribs manufactured in these regions were about two to two-and-a-half inches in width and tapered at the ends, or shoulders, to receive the gunwales. Neatly shaped and planed, the ribs were either bent with a hard bend or straight sided, depending on the builder's preference and what kind of canoe was needed, and gradually bent into a perfect U progressing up the hull.

The center crossbars or thwarts were shaped with a pronounced tumpline notch carved approximately three to four inches in from the gunwale tension to prevent the tumpline from slipping during carry. The tumpline notching of the center crossbars was a common practice in eastern canoe construction. In the St. Francis River area, this method of tumpline use may have been of white origin, since it was not otherwise used much beyond the eastern regions, or it might have



come about as need arose during the fur trade period.

The majority of the surviving birchbark canoes in existence today are from the Gatineau Algonquins. The Algonquin birchbark canoes of the Gatineau and the Coulonge river basins were similar in construction to the St. Francis canoes and may have represented a hybrid type of canoe influenced by, or originating from, the St. Francis River region. The Algonquin canoes constructed in the Gatineau were built to an average length of fourteen to sixteen feet, with the beams across the gunwales approximately thirty-four inches wide, and with perpendicular shaping of the stem ends. On average, these canoes had a gradual or soft rise of the gunwale sheer at the prows and had less, or minimal, pinching of the outwale and cap members. Various canoe examples built in the Coulonge river system demonstrate tight pinching of these members, but this varied depending on the builder's preferred manner of construction. The rib and

planking were also typical of western rib and plank, with the rib shaping and planking roughly two to two-and-a-half inches in width and uniform in shape through the rib members' length, and the rib-ends' shoulders shaped to receive the gunwales. The shaping of the canoe's hull by the ribs was generally hard-ribbed to slightly flared, similar to the shaping of the St. Francis canoe type. The planking was finished throughout in the three sectional pattern and overlapped at the edges. Most commonly the bark used for the hulls of these canoes was always of one piece, a full length of birchbark. The Algonquin canoes built along the Ottawa river systems displayed high-quality bark used in the hulls, with suitable girth. It was gathered mostly from the Gatineau and Coulonge river basins and either used locally or shipped to fur trade outposts.

In later periods, canoes of these regions began to be less refined in construction when the Gatineau vicinity became popular with white sportsmen. With increasing demand for canoes to facilitate travel on rivers and lakes, canoes were constructed more hastily and workmanship deteriorated.

Cree/Naskapi birchbark, fifteen feet, six inches long and thirty-five inches wide, from Lac St.-Jean, Quebec, circa 1880.



Eastern Cree canoes arriving at the fort at the mouth of Great Whale River on the eastern side of Hudson Bay in 1903. Here is a dramatic example of people using very different canoes for different purposes. The canoe in the foreground, a crooked canoe, would not have been of much use for carrying heavy loads, but would turn on a dime in rapids. The canoe in the background, with the flatter bottom, could carry substantial loads safely across a windy lake.

Cree

Native inhabitants of the northern boreal forest regions have been designated by complex documentation under such groups as the Eastern Cree (Naskapi/Montagnais in eastern James Bay and Hudson Bay) and Western Cree/Ojibwa (western James Bay and Hudson Bay). These bands were nomadic, governed by the seasons and settling wherever the food sources were suitable. Territorial boundaries for these groups were generally fluid, due to their constant movement. These bands would later be categorized under different tribal names by whites.

Whatever their designation, the Cree groups inhabited the northern shores of the Gulf of the St. Lawrence and Labrador and the Hudson Bay regions of the Little and Great Whale river systems. Cree bands in the boreal forest climate migrated from season to season, leaving their summer encampments for winter settlements, which were generally re-used annually by family groups. These hunting grounds neighbored the hunting areas of other Native groups or families likewise moving to winter grounds.

The surviving Cree canoes that exist in museum storage or in private collections were primarily constructed in these river regions and almost all display fine qualities of workmanship. Those canoes built by the Cree bands of the Saguenay River region or Lake St. John, designated as Montagnais Cree, are noted for their excellent craftsmanship.

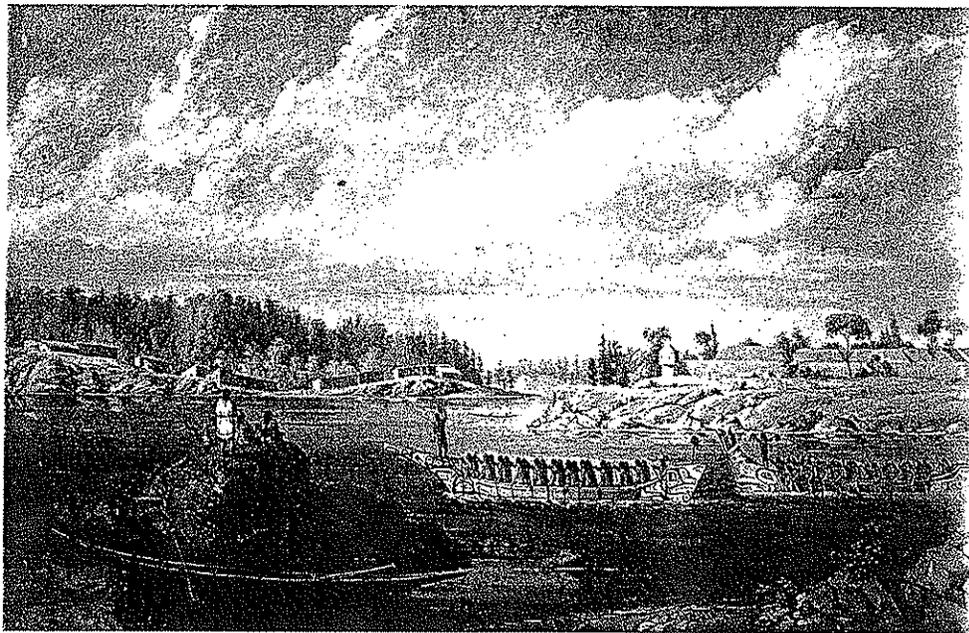
Canoes throughout these regions were between fourteen and fifteen feet in length, with beams of approximately thirty-two to thirty-four inches, yet some canoes were observed as large as eighteen feet in length with beams of thirty-four inches. The hull designs were commonly U-shaped to slightly flared, with a hull rise or rocker of about six to eight inches at ends from the hull plane, similar to those built in the Lake St. John region and the lower St. Lawrence. Another feature of these canoes was a complete rocker, where the canoe hull rises as much as one foot from midship to the ends, like those canoes classified as "crooked canoes" built by the Cree bands from the Great Whale and Little

resources at least as far back as nine thousand years ago. The most recent work and thought in this field suggests that the first people migrated into this area long before that time (possibly as much as twenty thousand years ago), traveling from Asia around the northern Pacific rim by skin boat or wooden canoe from landfall to landfall. Perhaps the forms of these vessels survive in some measure in the historic vessels of the Northwest Coast, as other remnants of Asian origins survive in certain bowl and tool forms, painted and carved design structures and characteristics, and of course in the appearance of the people themselves.

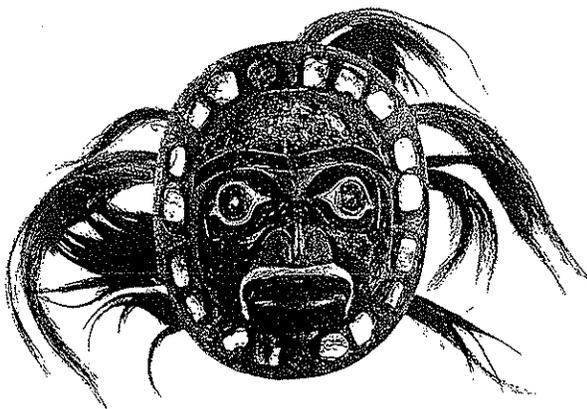
Basketry fragments found in waterlogged archaeological sites in Washington State and Alaska demonstrate a clear continuity of form, weaving techniques and materials that reaches back from three thousand to fifty-five hundred years ago. Regarding the antiquity of canoe forms, one important village location has provided evidence of continuity over half a millennium. At the Ozette village site on the southern Northwest Coast in Washington State, an archaeological site dubbed the "Pompeii of the Northwest Coast" has been excavated.

It were parts of five ancient houses of the Makah people, which had been inundated by a catastrophic mudslide between three hundred and five hundred years ago. The systematic excavation of this unique site yielded samples of all kinds of household objects: tools, weaving materials and equipment, bowls, boxes, carved house screens and even canoe models. All were damaged by the impact of the slide, but nonetheless serve as valuable ties to the past. Even though only fragments survive, the parts of canoe models that have been recovered show us that Makah canoes of nearly five hundred years ago were of the same design and appearance as those recorded by the earliest Euro-American explorers at the end of the eighteenth century. The full-sized canoes, unfortunately for posterity, were down on the beach at the time of the slide, washed out to sea by the force of the mud torrent. Only a few scattered pieces of these vessels survived under the mud and rock of the landslide.

Visual documentation of Native canoes by Euro-American artists who accompanied the Spanish, English, American and Russian explorers and traders on the Northwest Coast in the late eighteenth century shows fully developed, familiar canoe types, most of which remained the same into the nineteenth and even the twentieth century. One could readily presume that most of these vessels shared at least a similar antiquity with those of the Makah at Ozette, and probably underwent their initial development more than a thousand years



ABOVE: *Return of the War Party*. In this 1847 painting by Canadian artist Paul Kane, he has depicted highly decorated war canoes returning to what is now Victoria Harbour with their war trophies: the heads of slain enemies. Kane fabricated the scene from stories related to him by local Native historians, using model canoes as subjects for the picture. He was not aware of which end was the bow on the lead canoe (a Head canoe type) and illustrated it traveling backward.



LEFT: Headdress frontlet. Worn as part of a bird-skin and ermine-pelt headdress commonly known today as a "peace dance headdress," a carved and inlaid wooden frontlet such as this would be made to display family and lineage crests. They were often richly adorned with blue-green abalone shell, which was obtained in trade from First Nations of California and Mexico. Local Northwest Coast abalone shells were small and pale on the inside, making them less desirable for inlays.