



EXTRAORDINARY
CANADIANS

Big Bear

by RUDY WIEBE



Buffalo; Guns and Horses

This story happened more than a century ago, but it is still going on. If you want to know it, read this book and then watch the television news or read a newspaper. The news stories about First Nations in Canada today echo the life lived by Big Bear and other Plains Cree in what is now called Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Montana. Big Bear was both more ancient and more modern than the nineteenth-century White Canadians who tried to destroy him. His innate conviction that he had the human right to be himself was as powerful as his understanding of his inalienable right to the land that had sustained and protected his ancestors for five hundred generations.

THERE ONCE WAS A BABY BOY born at Jackfish Lake, near present-day North Battleford, Saskatchewan, who would grow up to receive the Cree name Mistahimaskwa, Big Bear. His father was Mukatai, Black Powder, a Saulteaux who had long been chief of a Plains Cree band, and his mother was either Cree or Saulteaux. Her name was perhaps too powerful to speak

aloud, because no one can remember it. Her name is simply given as None. In the same way, sixty years later, on September 29, 1885, the Inmate Admittance Records of Stony Mountain Penitentiary will declare Big Bear's religion to be None. And there his name will vanish as well. In a tiny cell inside stone walls as impenetrable as the limestone cliffs they are built upon, Mistahimaskwa will become a number, Prisoner 103, until he was discharged in February 1887. To die within a year.

Big Bear died in the lee of Cutknife Hill during a January snowstorm, not fifty kilometres as the raven flies from the lake where he was born. As he explained to fellow Cree chiefs gathered near Fort Carlton in 1884: "Our People lived with the buffalo all our lives, so we were blind in regard to making treaty. We did not understand the treaty when we heard of it, nor saw what use we had for it. Our food and clothing were in our hands, the country was free to us wherever we wanted to go, that was why we thought ourselves rich."

And the land given to the First People by the Creator—the land stripped from them by treaty—is still very rich. There are again buffalo beside Jackfish Lake where Big Bear was born, herds of cows and bulls and yearlings and little tan calves. But now they graze behind seven strands of barbed wire.

It was because of the buffalo that many Woods Cree in the late eighteenth century moved to the edges of the boreal forest

and gradually became powerful Plains People. As forest hunters they had begun a shrewd trade with the Hudson's Bay Company when ships from England first arrived in 1668. Beyond meeting their own want for goods such as kettles, needles, tobacco, and tea to gather hospitable groups around winter fires, the Cree quickly became the peaceful middlemen for other tribes far inland. An axe traded at Hudson Bay for one beaver was worth six beavers when carried a thousand miles inland by canoe to the buffalo-hunting Blackfoot Confederacy, who lived between the Saskatchewan rivers, or to the corn-growing Mandan along the Missouri; a fourteen-beaver gun was worth fifty.

However, with time, new political relations developed among the tribes, caused by both the pressure of woodland people pushing into prairie hunting territory and the arrival of the horse. While trading with the Cree for European goods, the Blackfoot began to accumulate horses from their southern neighbours. This conjunction on the Great Plains of convenient iron from the north—particularly steel knives and guns—with the astounding strength of horses from the south transformed everyone's way of hunting the buffalo that grazed everywhere to the prairie horizon. The huge animals that offered everything needed for life, for health and happiness, now no longer needed to be hunted in a solitary, dangerous

stalk; People no longer needed to build complex lanes to lure and drive buffalo over the cliffs of a killing jump, or into the corralled surround of a pound, where their wild strength could be crushed together into immobility and speared to death. A horse could outrun any buffalo, it could bring its mounted hunter so close, running flat-out, that one arrow behind the shoulder, one bullet, could drop the great animal dead in its tracks. And beyond that, huge, moveable communal hunts with their glorious camaraderie became not only possible, they also provided rich food for great numbers of People.

The Woods Cree recognized that if they joined into large bands on the plains for the summer and hunted the shifting herds, they could live well and also dry enough meat for pounded pemmican and tan enough hides for clothing and lodges to take them comfortably through the winter inside their familiar forests. Avoiding the isolated bush loneliness of small family groups stalking a solitary moose to survive the winter darkness, they could now enjoy year-round the comfort and safety of many People living together. All they needed was more horses.

Only the prairie Blackfoot Confederacy of Siksika, Blood, and Peigan could provide horses in numbers. Gradually their peaceful trading partnership turned into conflict. As the pressure for additional hunting space and horses grew, trading evolved into raids. Why trade when, if you were daring and

clever enough, you could steal twenty Blackfoot horses in one night? To return home riding a magnificent buffalo runner and singing a personal song of triumph (and your opponent's humiliation) became a Cree warrior's high honour. The more horses you captured, the more horses you could give to your friends, the better you could all hunt, the more stories you could recite during communal festivals, and the more swiftly you could ride over hill and prairie, the wind whistling happiness in your ears.

By the mid-1820s, the peaceful trading partnership between Cree and Blackfoot was largely an Elder's memory. For decades the Horse Wars shaped both societies: endless repetitions of swift, brutal raids and short-lived peace treaties. After 1810, Hudson's Bay Company traders typically recorded events such as these: "Blackfoot warriors attacked a Beaver Hills Cree camp, destroying 16 tents," or "100 Cree warriors attacking a Blood camp of 30 lodges on the Red Deer River and killing a good many and bringing away 96 horses and six women." European trade goods had intensified conflict among communities over tribal territory.

The Plains Cree lived and hunted in loose, shifting bands following a senior, prestigious civil chief; in times of attack or emergency, a younger war chief took command and organized band response. An official crier would walk

through camp, shouting the news of the day, the chief's orders, or the call to council. The council circle advised the chief about necessary decisions, the youngest men speaking first. But anyone, including women, could voice opinions until the chief made a, usually consensus, decision. In 1872, English officer William Butler (later The Right Honourable General Sir William Butler), commissioned by Prime Minister Macdonald to travel across the North-West, described the Cree society he encountered in this way:

“[The Cree] who first welcomed the [White] new-comer is the only perfect socialist or communist in the world. He holds all things in common with his tribe—the land, the bison, the river.... He kills a moose and to the last bit the coveted food is shared by all.... If a stranger comes and he is hungry, let him be first served and best attended to. If one child starves in an Indian camp, you may know that in every lodge every stomach is hungry.”

Butler's colonial-romantic style describes an historic reality. The last quarter of the nineteenth century would prove that such a communal hunting and gathering world of independent Peoples could not survive the relentless pressure of eastern Canada's agricultural and industrial society.