

## “As we are both deceived”: Strategies of Status Repair in 19thC Hudson’s Bay Company Correspondence<sup>1</sup>

KATHLEEN VENEMA  
*Department of English*  
*University of Winnipeg*

In 1670, King Charles II of England granted the directors of the newly formed Hudson’s Bay Company of Adventurers exclusive trading rights over a vast territory that stretched across northern North America from Labrador to the Rocky Mountains. The Hudson’s Bay Company would quickly become one of the most massive mercantile monopolies of the western world and the world’s most lucrative fur trading company.<sup>2</sup> Historians have conventionally figured the fur trade as one of Canada’s original economic “pillars”<sup>3</sup> and, until recently, focused almost exclusively on economic issues and material details.<sup>4</sup> In the last several decades, however, social historians have begun to account for the lives and work of the people deeply involved in, affected by, and crucial to, the fur trade – people who appear only obliquely in the written

---

<sup>1</sup>The author would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of the staffs at the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (Winnipeg) and the National Archives of Canada (Ottawa).

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Merk, “Introduction to the Revised Edition: The Strategy of Monopoly,” *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson’s Journal*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1968) xi, xiii.

<sup>3</sup>Winston Churchill, “Forward,” *The History of the Hudson’s Bay Company 1670-1870, Vol. II: 1763-1870*, ed. E. E. Rich (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1959) ix; John S. Galbraith, *The Hudson’s Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1957); Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, rev. ed. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1956); E.E. Rich, ed., *The History of the Hudson’s Bay Company 1670-1870, Vol. II: 1763-1870* (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1959).

<sup>4</sup>Michael Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory: Everyday Life in Hudson’s Bay Company Service York Factory, 1788-1870*, Studies in Archaeology, Architecture, and History (Ottawa: Environment Canada, 1989) 27. Further citations appear parenthetically in text.

reports and who left few if any records of their involvement.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the roles and lives of aboriginal women and men, the evolution of Métis ethnicity, and the contribution of European women have not gone entirely unremarked.

Despite the broadening focus, however, little attention has yet been paid to the unique workplace that the Hudson's Bay Company (hereafter "HBC" or "the Company") constituted and the unique discursive activity on which that workplace fundamentally depended. Although Company headquarters remained in London for its entire 200-year existence, by far the majority of its "gentlemen and servants" lived out their terms (sometimes their entire lives) in isolated locations across northern North America. The HBC's unique geographical "workplace" required equally unique discursive maintenance – specifically, the exchange of hundreds of thousands of letters between men at the Company's far-flung posts and between those posts and headquarters in Montreal and London. Although the Hudson's Bay Company's extraordinary business success could, arguably, be attributed to its employees' constant epistolary activity,<sup>6</sup> little attention has yet been paid to the textual, the performative, the rhetorical, and the social constructivist nature of the actual letters.

Business writing in the HBC was strictly regularized when George (later Sir George) Simpson joined the Company in 1820. A young clerk in London, Simpson had attracted the favourable attention of Andrew Wedderburn Colvile, in whose brokerage firm he worked.

---

<sup>5</sup>Flora Beardy and Robert Coutts, eds., *Voices from Hudson Bay: Cree Stories from York Factory* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1996); Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1980); Payne, *op cit.*; Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974); Sylvia Van Kirk, *'Many Tender Ties': Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980).

<sup>6</sup>"If the Councils and their Minutes can be considered as the heart of the fur trade," says R. Harvey Fleming, "then the journals, accounts and letters were the blood of the organization." R. Harvey Fleming, "Introduction," *Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert's Land, 1821-31*, ed. Fleming, (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1940) ix.

Colvile, one of the Company's directors, recognized Simpson's innate business skills, and in 1820, as part of HBC strategy in its conflict with the North West Company, summarily appointed Simpson "Governor-in-Chief *locum tenens*."<sup>7</sup> In that capacity, Simpson exerted more power in HBC matters than any other officer in North America. Had he not been as extraordinarily capable as he was, Simpson would almost certainly have been universally disliked for such an unorthodox entry into the Company's highest ranks – and for his stickling attention to every detail of the Company's business.<sup>8</sup> Very much in keeping with contemporary emphases on bureaucratization, administration, system, and efficiency,<sup>9</sup> Simpson managed the company according to an exacting and eminently successful economic programme. That programme included a highly-regulated communication system — specifically the exchange of letters amongst the various posts and between himself and the people in charge of those posts (Galbraith, "Introduction" xv).

Enormous numbers of those letters have survived and are collected in archives across Canada; they document the business activities of a vast mercantile enterprise and the myriad shifting relationships in the HBC's dense social network. This paper, part of a larger project that examines discursive constructions of fur trade masculinity and imperialist contact, examines two

---

<sup>7</sup>John S. Galbraith, *The Little Emperor: Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976) 22-3; Rich 272-3. Further citations of Galbraith appear in text as (Galbraith, "Emperor").

<sup>8</sup>According to John Galbraith, Simpson's concern with details "would be incredible to a modern corporation executive. In dozens of supplementary letters written to factors and traders . . . every aspect of the fur trade, however insignificant it might appear, fell under his scrutiny — leaky boats, pay of guides, observance of Sunday religious services, discontented apprentice clerks, and a multitude of other matters. Yet he was not dominated by minutiae. His instructions to the Company's officers were all calculated to the ultimate purpose of maximum efficiency and maximum profit. He had become a virtuoso of the managerial art." John S. Galbraith, "Introduction," *London Correspondence Inward from Sir George Simpson 1841-42*, ed. Glyndwr Williams (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1973) xv. Further citations appear in text as (Galbraith, "Introduction").

<sup>9</sup>Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) 30-1; Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987) 5-6.

sets of HBC correspondence in order to consider how, in specific cases, HBC “gentlemen”<sup>10</sup> used epistolary form to negotiate the power relationships that determined their workplace status – their literal and figurative “placement” in the country. As Charles Bazerman and James Paradis explain,

[Workplace] texts are the transactions that make institutional collaboration possible; they are the means by which individuals collectively construct the contexts out of which intellectual and material products emerge. In the pragmatic worlds of these specialized work communities, text is a force that transforms human physical and conceptual limits . . . text construct[s] versions of reality.<sup>11</sup>

In the two correspondences examined, we get a glimpse of how two different men, both constrained by epistolary form, use the *possibilities* of that form to revise and transform discursive reality when correspondence from George Simpson fundamentally threatens their professional status.<sup>12</sup>

Epistolary theorists agree that theirs is a shifting, unstable, labile genre, arguably productive of every other writing genre that has developed, but one whose textual dimensions are understudied in proportion to its prevalence and the powerful social forms it takes. They also agree that while the genre is multi-form, it possesses certain stable features, including its dialogic reciprocity, its construction of the persona of the writer and the reader, the real or metaphoric distance that its form negotiates, and its always tenuous existence between public and private

---

<sup>10</sup>“Generally speaking,” G.P. de T. Glazerbrook explains, “the company’s employees were divided into ‘gentlemen’ and ‘servants’. The first were those who had some education and capacity for administration, and were in line for promotion.” G. P. de T. Glazerbrook, “Introduction.” *The Hargrave Correspondence 1821-1843* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1938); facsimile ed. (New York: Greenwood, 1968) xxi. Further citations appear in text.

<sup>11</sup>Charles Bazerman and James Paradis, “Introduction,” *Textual Dynamics of the Professions: Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991) 4.

<sup>12</sup>Because the massive HBC archive offers almost unlimited possibilities, I have deliberately limited this paper’s scope to a small portion of correspondence to and from George Simpson in the early 1840s.

spheres.<sup>13</sup> According to William Merrill Decker, letters are meant, essentially, to please and not to intrude unnecessarily. “[T]he ideal,” he claims, “. . . is less a matter of form than of effective content: writing that can please or otherwise fulfill the recipient’s expectations” (19). Decker inadvertently echoes the vocabulary of politeness theory and by doing so, locates the labile letter precariously balanced between what politeness theorists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson call “positive” and “negative face.” According to Brown and Levinson, “positive face” is “the positive consistent self-image” a person claims, while “negative face” is a person’s basic claim to “freedom of action and freedom from imposition.”<sup>14</sup> Like ideal interaction (Brown and Levinson 61), the ideal letter maximally preserves and enhances both its recipient’s positive and negative face. Lynne Magnusson’s ground-breaking work on Shakespearean language and social discourse explicitly articulates the relationship between politeness theory and epistolary form, and provides a powerful analytical model for examining what she calls, “socially situated verbal interaction.”<sup>15</sup> Magnusson’s analysis of Elizabethan vernacular letter-writing is particularly relevant to this study, since that writing so clearly exhibits

the extent to which power relations in civil exchanges come to extend more  
deeply into the grain of the language — into the discourse that enacts the heart of

---

<sup>13</sup>Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982) 117; Charles Bazerman, “Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres,” *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Baron and Nigel Hall (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000) 15, 27; David Barton and Nigel Hall, “Introduction,” *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* 1-2; William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998) 4, 14, 20, 36, 46-7, 80; Toby L. Ditz, “Formative Ventures: Eighteenth-century Commercial Letters and the Articulation of Experience,” *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) 62, 72-3; Rebecca Earle, “Introduction: Letters, Writers and the Historian,” *Epistolary Selves* 1; Ylva Hasselberg, “Letters, Social Networks and the Embedded Economy in Sweden: Some Remarks on the Swedish Bourgeoisie, 1800-1850,” *Epistolary Selves* 99-100; Carolyn Steedman, “A Woman Writing a Letter,” *Epistolary Selves* 117-18. Further citations of Altman, Decker, and Ditz appear in text.

<sup>14</sup>Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use. Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics*, ed. John J. Gumperz (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 61. Further citations appear in text.

<sup>15</sup>Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 1. Further citations appear in text.

the business rather than the flourishes that accompany it. In the early modern period, increasingly more subtle and complex verbal tools serve the important social functions of civility, which include the mutual acknowledgment and display of the relative power of interlocutors, the management and repair of aggression, and the maintenance of the hierarchical social arrangement. (37)

In much the way that Magnusson describes, 19<sup>th</sup> c fur traders, too, were regularly obliged both to manage and repair aggression and to maintain the scrupulously monitored HBC hierarchy — all within the constraints and the possibilities of epistolary form.

Despite his inauspicious origins (Galbraith, *Emperor* 11) and his unorthodox entry into the Company, Governor George Simpson was, unarguably, the single most powerful man connected with the enterprise. Simpson, dubbed “the little emperor” by his admirers (Galbraith, “Introduction” xvi), answered only to the London Committee and, among a range of powers, enjoyed the relative autonomy to assign and reassign people as he saw fit. Given the extreme isolation of many HBC postings, the possibility of reassignment to a “bad” – or a “worse” – location was strong incentive to most of the men to meet with the Governor’s approbation. In the course of his forty-year career with the HBC, Simpson received thousands of letters from those men: official letters reporting on business and reams of private letters, most of which requested favours or solicited his opinion. Much more rarely, they were genuinely intimate letters maintaining some of his few uninhibited friendships.<sup>16</sup> Simpson’s own letters, even those marked “private,” are remarkable for their insistent focus on business affairs (Galbraith, *Emperor*

---

<sup>16</sup>Arthur S. Morton, *Sir George Simpson: Overseas Governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1944) 288.

ix). A brief but telling example is Simpson's 15 January 1840 note to James Hargrave, who was, at the time, the Chief Trader at York Factory on leave from his duties in order to marry. "My dear Hargrave," Simpson writes,

The object of the present is to convey to you & your Bride our warmest congratulations on the recent happy event which we saw announced yesterday in a Glasgow Paper – and that every happiness may attend you both, is the earnest, and fervent hope of my Better half, and of

My dear Hargrave

Your Sincere Friend

GeoSimpson

To that brief congratulation, Simpson could not refrain from adding a postscript five times the length of the letter and dealing exclusively with business details – tasks that he required the honeymooning Hargrave to look into.<sup>17</sup>

It might be argued that Simpson had taken a precise measure of the man he addressed. James Hargrave entered the HBC in 1821 and spent the bulk of his 40-year career managing Company affairs at York Factory, one of the HBC's principal communications and transshipping centres.<sup>18</sup> In that position, he managed increasingly enormous volumes of incoming trade goods and outgoing fur supplies and maintained an extensive correspondence with men at all the small and large posts across the country that York Factory served (Payne 22; Glazerbrook xxv-xxvi). If, as John Galbraith suggests, "Simpson's concern with details would be incredible to a modern corporation executive" ("Introduction" xv), the sheer volume of writing associated with Hargrave's position is at least as incredible. On 10 December, 1838, for instance, Hargrave's

---

<sup>17</sup>National Archives of Canada (NAC) MG19 A21 Series I Letter 426 (Reel C 74).

<sup>18</sup>Jennifer S. H. Brown, "Changing Views of Fur Trade Marriage and Domesticity: James Hargrave, His Colleagues, and 'the Sex,'" *The Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 6.3 (1976): 92.

letterbooks contain draft versions of thirty letters, most at least a page in length, some longer, all of which would have been recopied in Hargrave's copperplate hand before delivery.<sup>19</sup> Margaret Arnett MacLeod describes the significance of Hargrave's assiduous epistolary activity to the Company. "In addition to every . . . 'public' letter," she explains,

[Hargrave] usually wrote a second one marked 'private.' In the latter . . . he soothed ruffled feelings, explained regulations that had caused resentment, and gave encouragement, hope, or sympathy as needed, even though through many years he was far from content with the conduct of the Company's affairs himself. His letterbooks suggest the large part that the extra effort of these "private" letters must have played in welding the Company's personnel into some semblance of unity and loyalty.<sup>20</sup>

Simpson was assuredly well-aware of Hargrave's unwavering efforts, epistolary and otherwise, on the Company's behalf — and of the personal ambitions<sup>21</sup> that made him a likely person to accede to his Governor's endless requests and regulations.

G. P. de T. Glazerbrook calls Hargrave's writing, "stilted, even for the style of the age" (xvii); Hargrave's peculiar style is nowhere more evident than in his official letters to Simpson, which are consistently more formal even than other HBC gentlemen's polite tomes. Hargrave's private correspondence with Simpson is only marginally less marked by extreme deference, as his letter of congratulations on the Governor's knighthood exemplifies. "Dear Sir George," he writes on 13 July 1841,

---

<sup>19</sup>NAC MG19 A21 Series II Vol. 23.

<sup>20</sup>Margaret Arnett MacLeod, "Introduction," *The Letters of Letitia Hargrave*, ed. MacLeod (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1947); Facsimile ed. (New York: Greenwood, 1969) xlix.

<sup>21</sup>Brown, "Changing" 94.

I beg leave to add a few private lines to my public Letter of this date for the purpose of joining my poor mite of congratulations to the general voice of the world on the honorable distinction conferred upon you by our gracious Sovereign. — Richly and worthily has it been deserved, — long and happily may it be borne!<sup>22</sup>

Hargrave's discursive choices here reflect his acute awareness of the power differential that characterized his relationship with Simpson. According to Brown and Levinson, interlocutors choose modes of politeness that are determined by estimations of their relative power, the social distance between them and the degree of imposition attached to the discursive event (74). In this case, Hargrave relies exclusively on “negative politeness” — discursive gestures that maximally assure a hearer that his desire for territory and self-determination are and will be respected (70). By doing so, he obliquely articulates the social fact that the power difference between himself and Simpson is sufficiently great that even congratulations — on the surface a non-threatening act — have to be made in the context of permission and implicit apology.

Hargrave's wonted deference to Simpson was put to the test at various points in his long career, particularly, as MacLeod points out, during his protracted attempts to secure a promotion to Factor-ship.<sup>23</sup> Certainly Simpson's letter of 29 June 1843, excerpted below, would have provoked considerable consternation on Hargrave's part. Marked “private,” it nevertheless devotes itself almost entirely to matters of business. Simpson begins by indicating that eyestrain requires him to dictate the letter to his private secretary, Hopkins, who, he assures Hargrave, “is perfectly confidential[.] I, therefore, say & write through him as if in the full exercise of my own

---

<sup>22</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) D5/6 Folio 166.

<sup>23</sup>MacLeod lxxiv-lxxv.

pen.” After a lengthy paragraph disagreeing with Hargrave’s proposal to increase the York Factory Indent,<sup>24</sup> Simpson launches into the following, ostensibly light-hearted harangue:

I am told the establishment of York is in very high order. Had I been enabled to spare time, I should have taken a run down this season, but . . . the extension of my voyage . . . was quite impracticable. — You talk of the economy of your buildings; I am disposed, however, to think that there is rather a waste and misapplication of labor, otherwise we should have had no such erection at York as a look-out I hear of, which is described as the wonder of the age in the building way . . . & which to be plain with you some of our witty friends have named “Hargrave’s folly.” That is what I call luxurious smoking, at 200 feet above the level of the mosquitoes [sic]; I have no doubt that a glass of Madeira and water, or a foaming tankard of Brown Stout are very delightful in mid-air — Hopkins says so, having experienced a little luxury in that way with a jovial clerical friend of his on the tower of St. Olave’s Church in London.<sup>25</sup>

Simpson concludes the letter by offering Hargrave a share in his order of Manilla cigars and leaves Hargrave with the task of distributing those cigars to other, equally fortunate, gentlemen. The excerpt is noteworthy for its characteristic absences: Simpson’s writing typically eschews any hint of hedging, explanation, or apology. According to Brown and Levinson, this kind of discourse — they would call Simpson’s letter a “bald on record face-threatening act” (60) — is a hallmark of the discursively powerful speakers who can, as they say, “enlist audience support to destroy [the hearer’s] face without losing [their] own” (69).

---

<sup>24</sup>“Indents” were the lengthy and detailed lists, drawn up by Chief Factors and Chief Traders, of all the goods that would be required in successive years.

<sup>25</sup>NAC MG19 A21 Series I Letter 641 (Reel C-75).

Interestingly, Simpson, who was notorious for his control over even minute details of HBC business, levels criticism at what he knows only through others' reports. "[O]therwise," he writes, "we should have had no such erection at York as a look-out *I hear of, which is described as the wonder of the age . . . & which to be plain with you some of our witty friends have named 'Hargrave's folly'*" (emphasis added). Simpson, that is, both underscores the fact that Hargrave has not informed him about the look-out and implies that his resulting disapprobation may already be circulating through the wider HBC community. In the peculiar context of a vast workplace maintained by epistolary energy, HBC correspondence perfectly exemplifies the flexible boundaries between private and public spheres that Toby Ditz describes (70-3). Public HBC letters, for instance, were addressed to Company officials with the expectation that they would be widely read and circulated. Even private letters, though they were addressed to individuals, were widely expected – at least in terms of their content – to circulate amongst households or in bachelors' quarters.<sup>26</sup> In such a context, where even private correspondence was potentially public, censure of any kind potentially jeopardized the recipient's status, not just in relation to the source of the criticism, but also within the broader community (Ditz 68-9).

Indeed, despite its jovial tone, Simpson exploits precisely this danger, adding to his criticism the ostensibly lighthearted observation that Hopkins – the secretary present to the letter's construction, hence the person in first knowledge of Simpson's censure – has indulged in the same (relative) decadence that Simpson ascribes to Hargrave. Here, Simpson clearly exploits what Janet Gurkin Altman calls "the moment of enunciation," his consciousness "of writing in a specific present against which past and future are plotted" (122). Specifically, Simpson exploits the potentially public dimensions of censure by embedding into his text a credible version of the

---

<sup>26</sup>Donald Ross's chagrin, expressed in a letter to James Hargrave, at a mutual acquaintance who has broken into an HBC letter box (NAC MG19 A21 Series 1 Letter816), demonstrates the clear distinctions between sharing letters and wrongful access to letters.

(gossiping)<sup>27</sup> conversation that (may have) attended its construction, a strategic instance of enlisting a ready audience to threaten Hargrave's positive face (Brown and Levinson 69).

Hargrave's response is fascinating, particularly because, when he writes on 10 August 1843, he is responding to two of Simpson's letters, the first of which reports Simpson's lobbying on behalf of Hargrave's promotion. Hargrave's rhetorical dilemma is, as a result, exacerbated: in a single letter, he is obliged to acknowledge the enormous advantage he now stands to experience and to address Simpson's displeasure with his building ventures. "Dear Sir George," he therefore begins,

Your highly valued private favors of 28th and 29th June reached me on the 30th Ulto; and the content of the former especially, for which I feel deeply grateful, have repaid me for many long years of toil and expectation. — Permit me further to assure you that among those who are honored with the execution of your instructions in this land, — although the whole may surpass me in the success of their efforts to meet your expressed wishes, — I will yield to none in my anxious endeavouring to do so — or in a resolute determination to follow that course which I believe will be approved of by you.<sup>28</sup>

By contrast with these convoluted expressions of negative politeness, Hargrave negotiates Simpson's criticism with aplomb. Especially in the context of his repeated invitations to Simpson to visit York Factory and to participate directly in its business decisions, his response is a marvel of restraint. "I regret," he writes,

---

<sup>27</sup>Patricia Meyer Spacks's work on gossip offers a fascinating perspective on Simpson's discursive choices here. According to Spacks, "The analogy between . . . letters and gossip . . . remind[s] us of gossip's value as an agent of preservation . . . . [T]urning lives into stories declares their importance." Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 77.

<sup>28</sup>HBCA D5/8 Folios 417-19.

that your leisure did not permit you to honor us with a visit this summer, — for I should have much wished to have the benefit of your instructions regarding many matters of every day routine which I find it difficult to bring before you on paper with all their attending circumstances. — Such a visit would also have shown you how some of my witty friends had in their imagination counted my poor Outlook of less than 40 feet into a perfect Tower of Bable — 200 feet high! — The history of this affair is shortly as follows. — The roofs of the new Depot being too slant to be ascended at most seasons without danger to life or limb . . . a means to descry the arrival of the ship has formed a portion of the projected improvements consequent on the rebuilding of the old Factory. — In pursuance of this object . . . I seized the opportunity of a spare month and a few logs collected in this neighbourhood the same winter and got built our present modest and useful Outlook. — had I believed that you would have disapproved of such a step I certainly never would have so undertaken it . . . Its real use to the concern will be best illustrated by the fact that by aid of it last month we were enabled to perceive that our Schooner had, after her first attempt to sail for Churchill, been stranded on the eastern shore . . . By means of an immediate and powerful assistance we succeeded in getting her off shore without material damage; but without this means of observation we would in all likelihood have remained in ignorance of her fate till both vessel and cargo — perhaps crews — had been beyond the reach of rescue. — As for Madeira or Brown Stout in Mid-air — I must confess my foolish pate had neither conceived nor aspired to such subline ideas; and although I believe they must be very recherché in their way, yet it is

more than likely that my indifference to excitement will never allow me to try the experiment. —

Hargrave mitigates conflict by appealing to a standard of epistolary form: he gestures to the literal spatial distance that separates him from Simpson as the source of their current misunderstanding. “Since the letter contains within itself its own negation,” Altman explains, “epistolary narrators regularly make it emphasize alternately, or even simultaneously, presence and absence, candor and dissimulation, mania and cure, bridge and barrier” (42). By emphasizing the barrier that epistolary communication represents, Hargrave attempts to reconstruct solidarity with Simpson: separated against both their alleged wishes, misunderstandings are bound to occur.

Immediately afterward, however, assuming that his solidarity with Simpson has been re-established, Hargrave instantiates precisely the paradoxical potential of epistolary form (Decker 46-7): he launches into a lengthy written narrative to justify his actions. Significantly too, he embeds that justificatory narrative in a meta-narrative of “best business decisions.” By contrast, that is, with the negative politeness with which his letter begins, he frames his explanation as an expression of positive politeness, maximally assuring Simpson that he shares Simpson’s desires – specifically and simply, the Company’s best advantage, always. Hargrave’s final lines extend his gesture of positive politeness: by entering, self deprecatingly, into Simpson’s alleged good-humour, Hargrave agrees to participate in the putative entertainment his “folly” has afforded his HBC colleagues. In the face of Simpson’s censure, Hargrave’s restrained rhetorical choices re-establish a reality defined by solidarity in the service of the Hudson’s Bay fur trade.

Hargrave’s restraint is particularly notable juxtaposed with the very different repair strategies Alexander Fisher uses in a package of letters to Simpson on December 5, 1841.

Fisher, a Chief Trader, writes in an attempt to persuade Simpson to reverse his censure of Fisher's actions the previous year. Fisher encloses a variety of supporting documents that describe a complex story summarized as follows:

Fisher received his new posting in June 1840 at Norway House where he was in the company of four senior Chief Factors, four senior HBC men who all i) knew about his new posting, ii) were familiar with the territory in question, and iii) were cognizant of Simpson's particular decrees governing HBC activity in one region of the territory, a place called Portage la Loche. Several years previously, Simpson had expressly ordered that Company men travelling through the area should emphatically not engage natives at Portage la Loche to carry their packs. Despite the Chief Factors' shared knowledge, however, no one informed Fisher about Simpson's special instructions. That August, en route to his new post, Fisher received a letter from Fort Chipewyan indicating that a canoe had been dispatched to Portage la Loche for the express purpose of conveying him to his destination. Fisher availed himself of the canoe and, as per the instructions of that letter, left his brigade of men at Portage la Loche to follow after him. Unbeknownst to Fisher, his Brigade, in his absence, availed themselves of the carrying services of the natives of Portage la Loche.

On March 3 of the next year, 1841, Fisher received a detailed letter from his immediate supervisor, Roderick Mackenzie, in which Mackenzie chastizes Fisher for having left his Brigade at Portage la Loche while he went on ahead; details the problems associated, in the Company's eyes, with allowing their native servants to frequent Portage la Loche; quotes Simpson's express orders regarding Portage la Loche; and describes the season's provision shortages as a direct result of Fisher's disobedience. The letter, a copy of which Fisher includes in his package to Simpson, is markedly harsh. It clearly galls Fisher that Mackenzie, who was one of the Chief

Factors present the previous year at Norway House, could have informed him then of all this information, precisely to avoid the present debacle. At least as galling to Fisher is the fact that Mackenzie sends a copy of his rebuke — which is, from Fisher’s perspective, the first indication that anything is wrong — to George Simpson, who has responded by censuring Fisher harshly.<sup>29</sup>

Far less is known about Fisher than about Hargrave; though Fisher served as a Chief Trader from 1823 to 1842, he served primarily at minor posts. Letters from him exist in various archives, including Simpson’s, Hargrave’s, and Donald Ross’s,<sup>30</sup> but no specific “Fisher archive” exists. From a rhetorical perspective, Fisher’s use of documentary evidence and persuasive technique are most interesting. Along with his letter to Simpson describing the events, Fisher includes i) a three-page document outlining his arguments about the case; ii) a copy of Mackenzie’s letter, onto which Fisher adds his own notes; iii) a copy of a letter by another of the four Chief Factors present at Norway House the previous year, indicating that arrangements had been made for a canoe to meet him at Portage la Loche; iv) a copy of the letter from Fort Chipewyan confirming that the canoe had been despatched; and, finally, v) a copy of his letter of appointment to the new district.

Curiously, at least to 21st century readers accustomed to endlessly easy reproductive technology, the “copies” that Fisher encloses are all in his own handwriting, a fascinating instance of what constituted forensic “proof” at the time and a glimpse at the material basis on which professional integrity and status could be established or destroyed. More curious, however, especially in the context of HBC traders’ typical deference to Simpson, are Fisher’s main rhetorical strategies. “Dear Sir,” his letter to Simpson begins,

---

<sup>29</sup>Very few letters from Simpson to Fisher appear to have survived, an interesting instance of the inherent generic liabilities of epistolary study (Decker 53).

<sup>30</sup>Respectively, HBCA D5; NAC MG19 A21; and MG1 D20.

As we are both deceived with regard to the Portage la Loche affair, my self in receiving instructions at variance with your Rules and Regulations, and you made to believe that I had received correct necessary information respecting them . . . I have thought it might be proper in my own justification to lay before you the enclosed Documents . . . . I am at present labouring under the greatest suffering and grief of feeling . . . for a fault not my own, but that of other persons. I beg on the receipt of this, that you will generously come forward and honourably retrieve my Character while I am yet in the service and before it is too late. For I will not yet, allow myself to believe, you would willingly and knowingly injure the Character of any innocent Gentleman in the Service.<sup>31</sup>

Though Fisher begins with a gesture of positive politeness, alleging solidarity between himself and Simpson on the grounds that they have both been deceived, self-thematization saturates his discourse: “I have thought”; “I am labouring”; “I beg”; “I will not allow myself to believe.” And with this last claim, the face threatening suggestion that Simpson might “willingly and knowingly injure the Character of an innocent gentleman,” Fisher likely jeopardizes whatever solidarity he may have established. Almost bizarrely, Fisher risks even more explicitly face-threatening acts in the three-page argument he attaches to his letter. “I . . . have been made to suffer unjustly and innocently,” he laments there,

by being censured and broke from my charge without a hearing of any person to represent me . . . my Character has been greatly injured . . . in the estimation of my Friends and Colleagues as well as with the common servants in this Country, and tho’ being perfectly innocent . . . suffering severely in feeling, for it is the first thing that meets me when I rise and the last when I go to rest. . . .

---

<sup>31</sup>HBCA D5/6 Folios 319-327.

[A]s I strongly suspect that my instructions were never made known to Govr. Simpson and also he having but little time, and many important affairs to attend to, on the impulse of the moment perhaps sacrificed me. — For such reasons, I should feel sorry and be unwilling that any Gentleman in this Country should feel alarmed . . . as my fate to day, may be theirs to morrow I do not wish them . . . to think that Govr. Simpson would do an Act, beneath his Character and Dignity and seized with avidity upon such an affair for the purpose to destroy my prospects and Character and competence . . . . [R]ather that such should be thought of Govr. Simpson in this Country or in the Civilized World I have remained in the Country and with this view only . . . that Govr. Simpson might have time to see his mistake and remedy the evil, for most assuredly it was never his intention to injure an innocent Gentleman.<sup>32</sup>

Like Hargrave, Fisher is clearly acutely aware of the public nature of his censure and of the direct effects that censure has, and will have, on his status among his colleagues and in the Company generally. Unlike Hargrave, Fisher exploits not the spatial exigencies that provoke epistolary form, but the form's temporal instability. Not unlike Simpson, that is, Fisher situates himself at the very cusp of epistolarity's public-private tension by incorporating a fictional audience of colleagues into his discourse, rendering them virtually present to the challenge he issues Simpson: to remedy in the future the wrongs done to Fisher in the past. "I should," he writes, "be unwilling that any Gentleman in this Country should feel alarmed. As my fate to day, may be theirs to morrow I do not wish them to think that Govr. Simpson would do an act beneath his character and dignity." According to Altman, epistolary language is "Janus-like, . . .

---

<sup>32</sup>HBCA D5/6 Folios 321-2.

grounded in a present that looks out toward past and future. . . . The epistolary present is caught up in the impossibility of seizing itself, since the narrative present must necessarily postdate or anticipate the events narrated. For this reason epistolary narrative is particularly adapted to the schemer or calculator figure, who plots future events and analyzes past ones” (127). Whether or not Fisher could be characterized as a schemer, he inexplicably, arguably suicidally, frames his final argument in terms of *Simpson’s* ethos. Fisher explicitly advances and rejects an interpretation that would reflect badly on Simpson and figures his own actions as primarily motivated not to clear his own name but to give Simpson the opportunity to “see his mistake and remedy the evil.”

In Brown and Levinson’s terms, Fisher’s pleads his case by threatening both Simpson’s positive and negative face: not only do his requirements impinge on Simpson’s desire for autonomous determination, he threatens Simpson with the loss of all HBC gentlemen’s approbation. In the face of Simpson’s censure, Fisher proposes an unlikely discursive reality in which the powerful redress injustice under threat from their subordinates.

As my title suggests, both sets of correspondence examined here could be introduced with Alexander Fisher’s phrase, “As we are both deceived,” since both are provoked by a gap in interpretation between Simpson and an officer under his command. In each case, Simpson has responded with censure, so that both men feel their reputation is attacked; both fear for their subsequent status; and both potentially have the same thing – a Chief Factor-ship – to lose. How each man represents the misunderstanding, the source of misunderstanding, himself, his case,

and his solutions provides a fascinating instance of very different uses of politeness strategies within epistolary discourse. Politeness is, of course, as Magnusson explains,

strategic and context specific: the work it does to prevent, mitigate, and repair damage to immediate relations and to the overall social fabric intensifies at points of stress or threat. Hence, it varies not only with relative power but also with the risk level of particular speech events, and for this reason we will not find a static match between the stylistic forms of civility and the relative power of participants. (37)

Many more factors than can be examined here – many more factors than will likely ever be known – contributed to Fisher’s and Hargrave’s very different strategies of status repair. Their subsequent epistolary encounters with Simpson are, however, worth summarizing.

Except for the following testy and rhetorically extravagant note, James Hargrave heard nothing more from Simpson about his look-out:

Your explanations about the Lookout, which has been such a source of pleasantries throughout the country (from the Atlantic to the Pacific — from the shores of Labrador to the Polar Sea) are perfectly satisfactory; but, now that that work is completed, can you not contrive to reduce your establishment of people, which appears large.<sup>33</sup>

Hargrave was finally granted a Chief Factor-ship the following year, 1844. In 1845, three years after tendering his resignation and moving to Montreal, Alexander Fisher, by contrast, received the following final letter from Simpson:

I regret very much to learn that, “you find your means are not sufficiently ample to keep pace with your expenses” & that on that account, you are disposed

---

<sup>33</sup>NAC MG19 A21 Series I, Letter 667 (Reel C-75).

to resume your duties in the service. The Govr. & Committee were not at all prepared for this intimation, as from the circumstance of your having given notice of retirement in 1842 . . . they took it for granted that you had abandoned all idea of returning to the country. . . .

I think you could not have had better proof of my desire to serve you, than the obtaining for you the two years leave of absence you have enjoyed, & I am exceedingly sorry that, it is not in my power to be of further benefit to you in reference to your interests in the Fur Trade.<sup>34</sup>

Countless letters, many of them to Governor George Simpson, made the vast enterprise of Hudson's Bay Company fur trading possible. By participating in Simpson's highly-regulated communication system, individual HBC men collectively constructed the social and material dimensions of their unique workplace; those men's letters, moreover, contribute, in an ongoing way, to the documentary history of the Canadian west. HBC officers' records of status threat and status repair also demonstrate for posterity the rhetorical constraints and the rhetorical possibilities of epistolary form. Within that form, they evidence both the social realities that provoke particular politeness strategies and social realities as they are shaped by politeness strategies.

---

<sup>34</sup>HBCA D4/66 Folio 198.

**References**

- Altman, Janet Gurkin. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982.
- Barton, David and Nigel Hall, eds. *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000.
- . "Introduction." In Barton and Hall. 1-14.
- Bazerman, Charles. "Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres." In Barton and Hall. 15-29.
- and James Paradis. "Introduction." *Textual Dynamics of the Professions: Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991. 3-10.
- Beardy, Flora and Robert Coutts, eds. *Voices from Hudson Bay: Cree Stories from York Factory*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1996.
- Brown, Jennifer S. H. "Changing Views of Fur Trade Marriage and Domesticity: James Hargrave, His Colleagues, and 'the Sex.'" *The Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 6.3 (1976): 92-105.
- . *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1980.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use. Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics*. Ed. John J. Gumperz. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Decker, William Merrill. *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998.

- Ditz, Toby L. “Formative Ventures: Eighteenth-century Commercial Letters and the Articulation of Experience.” In Earle. 59-78.
- Earle, Rebecca, ed. *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600-1945*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999.
- . “Introduction: Letters, Writers and the Historian.” In Earle. 1-12.
- Fleming, R. Harvey, ed. *Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert’s Land, 1821-31*. Gen. ed. E. E. Rich. London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1940.
- Galbraith, John S. *The Little Emperor: Governor Simpson of the Hudson’s Bay Company*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1976.
- . “Introduction.” *London Correspondence Inward from Sir George Simpson 1841-42*. Ed. Glyndwr Williams. London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1973. xi-lviii.
- . *The Hudson’s Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1957.
- Glazerbrook, G. P. de T. “Introduction.” *The Hargrave Correspondence 1821 1843*. Toronto: Champlain Society, 1938. Facsimile ed. New York: Greenwood, 1968. xv-xxvi.
- Hasselberg, Ylva. “Letters, Social Networks and the Embedded Economy in Sweden: Some Remarks on the Swedish Bourgeoisie, 1800-1850.” In Earle. 95-107.
- Innis, Harold A. *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*. Rev. ed. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1956.
- MacLeod, Margaret Arnett, ed. *The Letters of Letitia Hargrave*. Toronto: Champlain Society, 1947. Facsimile ed. New York: Greenwood, 1969.
- Magnusson, Lynne. *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

- Merk, Frederick. "Introduction to the Revised Edition: The Strategy of Monopoly." *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1968. xi-xxxii.
- Morton, Arthur S. *Sir George Simpson: Overseas Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company*. Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1944.
- Payne, Michael. *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory: Everyday Life in Hudson's Bay Company Service York Factory, 1788-1870*. Studies in Archaeology, Architecture, and History. Ottawa: Environment Canada, 1989.
- Poovey, Mary. *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- Ray, Arthur J. *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974.
- Rich, E. E. *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company 1670-1870*. Vol. II: 1763-1870. London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1959.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *Gossip*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- Steedman, Carolyn. "A Woman Writing a Letter." In Earle. 111-33.
- Van Kirk, Sylvia. *'Many Tender Ties': Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670 1870*. Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980.
- Williams, Glyndwr, ed. *Hudson's Bay Miscellany 1670-1870*. Winnipeg: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1975.
- Zeller, Suzanne. *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987.