

Thanadelther (ca. 1700-1717)

The Thanadelther of Chipewyan legend was one of the most important and enduring figures of northwestern Canada and perhaps the only woman to play a truly significant part in its early history. Her importance extends far beyond her own culture. The journals of York Fort celebrate a woman they refer to as the Slave Woman, and although they never record her Indian name, which means "marten shake", Thanadelther and the Slave Woman are one and the same. Serving as guide and interpreter, she led employees of the Hudson's Bay Company to their first meeting with the Chipewyan in the Indians' home territory. As well, she was instrumental in establishing peace between the Cree and their traditional enemies, the Chipewyan, an absolute requisite before the Chipewyan could be brought into the trade with the Company. At the time of her early death, Captain James Knight, Governor-in-Chief in the Bay for the HBC, had selected the Slave Woman as his agent for making peace with all the other Northern Athapaskan-speaking Indians of Rupert's Land.

Thanadelther's story, as it is still recited by Chipewyan elders, is remarkably similar to that recorded by Captain Knight in the daily post journal of York Fort in the period 1715-1717. The legend holds that, when still a girl or very young woman, Thanadelther was captured and enslaved by the Cree. Some time after, the Cree were encamped near York Fort, where they traded furs for goods of European manufacture, items that were strange, beautiful, and wondrous to the Slave Woman. Thanadelther managed to escape her captors, but when her attempt to return to her own people proved impossible, she fled to the security of the English traders. When she arrived at York Fort, she amazed and delighted the English with her beauty and intelligence, for the Cree had told them that the Northern Indians — as the Chipewyan were known — were subhuman and had pointed tails like animals. Their understanding of the Northern Indians now dramatically altered by their meeting with the Slave Woman, the English determined to send a mission to the Chipewyan, to provide gifts, to make peace between them and the Cree, and to bring them to trade. All these goals were realized through the service of Thanadelther as guide and ambassador. The Company man distributed gifts — including axes, awls, knives, and muskets — and more gifts were promised if the Chipewyan brought furs to a new fort to be established for them at the mouth of the Churchill River. But first, the Northern Indians had to be trained in the use of the musket, and Thanadelther taught them to prepare the pelts of fur-bearing animals. Some Chipewyan men accompanied Thanadelther and her party back to York Fort, and beginning the next year (after Thanadelther's return, or 1717), when the new fort was built, the Northern Indians came annually to trade at Fort Churchill or the "great Stone House". To this day, the Chipewyan term for the English or English-Canadian is *theye-hotine* or "stone house dwellers".

The Hudson's Bay Company Archives provide a parallel but more detailed account of this embassy of peace and trade. Soon after the Treaty of Utrecht restored the Hudson's Bay

Company's territories and forts to them in 1713, Captain Knight assumed command at York Fort, replacing N. Jérémie, the French commandant. Knight discussed with Jérémie the prospects of establishing peace between Chipewyan and Cree, but the latter laughed at the proposal, for he had been unsuccessful at this effort for many years. Nevertheless, Knight wrote in the post journal that "I am Endeavouring to make a peace in the whole Country Round from N to SWt for a 1000 Miles".

He had placed his hope in the ability of a Chipewyan boy to be the guide and interpreter, and on the boy's death, Knight was near despair. Then in the autumn of 1714, the Slave Woman — who had just escaped her Cree captors — met English goose hunters at Ten Shilling Creek. "Almost Starv'd", she was taken to York Fort on 24 November 1714, where she strongly impressed Knight with her forcefulness and intelligence. Knight's former despair turned to hope, for the Slave Woman spoke the language, knew at least some Cree, was learning English, and knew the territory.

On 7 June 1715 Thanadelther left York to guide William Stewart and a party of about 150 Cree as the peace delegation. This group moved into the Barren Lands along the edge of the woods, experiencing many hardships and much hunger. Indeed, big game was so rare that the Cree were forced to split into many smaller parties, some of which took the opportunity to return to York. The Slave Woman, Stewart, and about a dozen Cree, however, went on. But sometime in mid-winter, their spirits faltering, they were unable to continue. Thanadelther asked them to remain for 10 days while she went ahead to find the Chipewyan and return. They agreed, and she left alone. On the morning of the tenth day, as Stewart and the Cree were contemplating returning to York in failure, Thanadelther arrived with a band of 400 Chipewyan. But the 400 Northern Indians were only a part of the population the Slave Woman had found, for there were "above a 100 Tents of her Country Men ... and that abundance more would have gon wth her to See the English Man ... but shee would not lett them come for fear of Mischief that they should do by quarrelling but they lay'd a little ways of ready to come if any Difference had happened".

After a return journey of 60 days, the Slave Woman, Stewart, ten Chipewyan, and the dozen Cree arrived at York Fort on 7 May 1716. They had been gone nearly a year. The following seven months Thanadelther spent instructing her Chipewyan companions about desirable pelts and the proper methods of preparation. Her knowledge of the Cree language developed from indifferent to fluent, and she learned English. She was probably married to one of her companions. She was constantly Knight's advisor concerning his plans for exploration of the northwest. He planned that she and William Norton, an apprentice later to become a Governor, were to leave with the Chipewyan in the spring of 1717 to contact other Northern Athapaskan nations, but she fell ill, and in spite of all efforts to save her, the Slave Woman died on 5 February 1717.

In a society in which the status of women was extraordinari-



A Chipewyan Woman Makes Peace with the Crees, 1715, by Franklin Arbuckle. HBC Neg. 59-370.

ly low, the Slave Woman was the leader and the strength of the journey across the Barrens, the forceful orator, the one of indomitable courage. Both Knight and Stewart recognized that the success of the mission was due to her as "the Chief promoter and Acter of it". On the day of her death, Knight wrote: "She was one of a Very high Spirit and of the Firmest Resolution that ever I see any Body in my Days and of great Courage & forecast."

FURTHER READINGS

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