

# How Canada invalidated intermarriage between European men and Indigenous women

by Linda May Henri

## "MARRYING IN"

Author Sylvia Van Kirk argues that intermarriages between aboriginal women and European men were a benefit to the fur trade and calls it "Marrying - In." Early European fur traders received numerous benefits for marrying Indigenous women

## RISE OF INTERMARRIAGE

These marriages were fundamental to the success of the fur trade and from the Aboriginal point of view allowed for cross cultural unions that integrated Europeans into native kinship networks

benefits for white fur traders included:

- Access to trails
- provisions
- knowledge of the land
- wives supplied food and clothing



Aboriginal women married to white fur traders were called **Country wives**

It was called marrying in the fashion of the country as there was no clergy on the land to make them marriages by Catholic rite

Intermarriages were subject only to rules implemented by fur trade companies and aboriginal custom

In New France, marriage was defined as openly recognized, mutual consent, cohabitation, and public understanding that a couple was husband and wife

While European men took country wives they were still attached to their own cultural norms. When they retired they would often married Christian women of European descent and marry in a European religious ceremony regardless of country wife

## RECOGNITION OF THE COUNTRY WIFE

European fur trader Chief Factor William Connolly left his country wife Suzanne of 30 years to marry his cousin in Catholic rite. After his death, did not included his wife Suzanne or his children with her in his will. Suzanne and her children went to court to receive their rightful inheritance and won in 1867.

In 1886, a similar court case was brought up. However, this time the court ruled against the country wife by not recognizing the couple's many years of cohabitation as a marriage.



## WHAT CHANGED IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY?

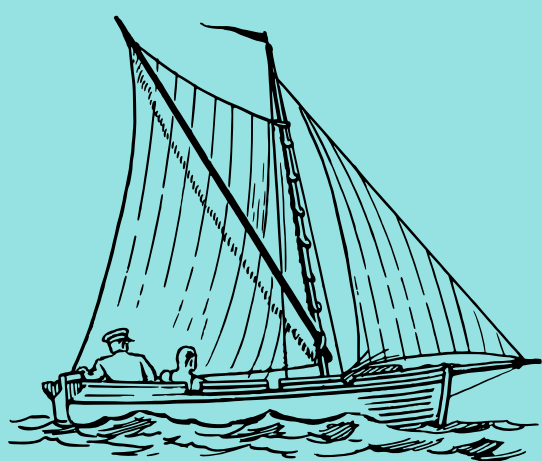
In the late 19th century Europeans decided to settle in Canada

Intermarriages were a fundamental social relationship that allowed for the success of the fur trade. It was not fundamental for colonial settling. Intermarriages became marginalized and discouraged

Colonizers wanted to preserve European culture in Canada and they feared that intermarriages had made fur traders "go native"

Aboriginal women did not conform to European gender roles and were not Christian during early settlement of Canada. Aboriginal women were therefore considered unsuitable to be "founding mothers" of Canada in the eyes of Europeans

With the arrival of settlers and clergymen Europeans were adamant that only their religious marital practices were legitimate and that the aboriginal peoples should adopt them. Eurocentric privilege allowed that their marriages became the only legal ones. Especially after the 1886 court case long term cohabitation no longer counted as marriage in colonial settler society



With less acceptance of cultural differences the Canadian government started to import white women, like the filles du roi, from France then from Britain to be the "founding mothers" for their new colonies

## HOW INTERMARRIAGES WERE IMPACTED

In the late 19th and early 20th century, an increase in racist rhetoric negatively impacted intermarriages

In 1885, during the North West Rebellion, Canada further delegitimized country marriages by not recognizing the independence and rights of the Métis people

Racist ideas about Indigenous people and culture as inferior to European culture circulated in everyday language through newspapers and in Canadian history textbooks. These racist ideas created stigma and a society of public shaming and shunning of people involved in cross cultural relationships

## MARRYING-OUT

"Marrying-in" was when European fur traders married Indigenous women in the early 19th century. These men would enter into the Indigenous community.

"Marrying-out" started to occur in the late 19th century. When European men married Indigenous women, instead of the husband entering the Indigenous community, Indigenous women lost their Indian status.

Colonialism placed itself in intermarriages with the Indian Act of 1869 that gave Indian status to only "male persons of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band." This patriarchal act ensured that Indigenous women would lose their Indian status as did their children if they married a non-status man.

This act worked threefold as a way to erase Indigenous presence from the land, assimilate Indigenous people, and was also cheaper for the government as it no longer had to fulfill treaty obligations to these women

Although the act that could remove a woman's status upon marriage is no longer in effect, it still continues to impact aboriginal people now as there was loss of identity, community, and people face difficulties in regaining their legal status as Indigenous people

Canadian Indigenous author E. Pauline Johnson gives Indigenous women a voice against injustice and racist discourses in our society with Indigenous heroines in her stories that leave their bigotted husbands and stand-up to their racist in-laws.

### Bibliography

Van Kirk, Sylvia. "From "Marrying-In" to "Marrying-out"; Changing Patterns of Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Marriage in Colonial Canada." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 3 (2002): 1-11.