

“Anti-Empire: Pemmican supply, Prices, and the HBC, 1810-1870”

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Introduction

In recent years the Hudson's Bay Company has been conscripted into *Empire, Incorporated*, as one of the corporations that built British Colonialism. Philip Stern, in his recent book, baldly states that the HBC, like other company states, came to rule vast numbers of people, over a vast territorial empire.¹ Though a historian, Stern, adopts the habit of political scientists to see and research the world “like a state.” Knowing little of how the HBC actually operated in North America, he claims that the HBC was a military, diplomatic and juridical enterprise,² with an exceptional investment in arms, bent on territorial expansion.³ In the process he claims the Red River Settlement was an HBC colony,⁴ and that the company committed atrocities against First Nations and the Metis at Red River.⁵

I might have focused on Stern's argument, but in truth he hardly bothers to support any of the claims he makes about the HBC, and indeed spends little time on the Company's actions. Instead, I will take a look at, and challenge, the image of the Hudson's Bay Company presented by George Colpitts's in his *Pemmican Empire: Food,*

¹ Philip J. Stern, *Empire, Incorporated: The Corporations that built British Colonialism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2023), 11.

² Ibid., 112.

³ Ibid., 125.

⁴ Ibid., 233. The Colony only became part of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1835, when the Selkirk Family transferred it to the HBC.

⁵ Ibid., 244. What these atrocities might be is anyone's guess.

*Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains, 1780-1882.*⁶ That said, I should also say that I don't disagree with significant parts of *Pemmican Empire*, but I do want to challenge what I see as an overstatement of the Power of the HBC in Rupert's Land.

In 2015, George Colpitts published *Pemmican Empire* and in it he made the claim that the food market hunt, and pemmican in particular, constituted an Empire. Pemmican had the power to create distinctive trade relations between new comers and native people, and the rising cost of pemmican was main dynamic that drove the NWC and HBC to merge in 1821. In playing up the powerful agency of pemmican, Colpitts also invented a new powerful HBC in the post-1821 period that was able to control the provision (food) trade. He claims that the HBC systematically drove down the price of pemmican, and established a “quota system” of purchasing it that further suppressed prices. This allowed the HBC to control the plains and parkland until the end of the bison era, and in so doing, eroded the collective power of the Metis, and forced all indigenous groups to hunt more and more bison. While these arguments have some merit, I will argue that George overemphasized the role and power of the HBC.

In particular, this paper will look at three issues or questions. The main premise in Colpitts' claim that the HBC was so powerful is that they had a Monopsony after

⁶ George Colpitts, *Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains, 1780-1882* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

1821. That is, they were effectively the single purchaser and that they had the buying advantages of driving down prices of pemmican. Secondly, I will closely examine the “price”, or proxies of “price,” of pemmican in more than one locale from 1810 to 1870. Thirdly, this paper interrogates the idea of an HBC “quota system” in purchasing pemmican and finds no evidence of it. On all of these issues, this paper comes to a significantly different conclusion than Colpitts did on the supposed power and imperial pretensions of the HBC.

HBC Monopsony

Crucial to Colpitts’ argument that the HBC was able to control the provisions trade, to drive down the price of pemmican, control the plains and parkland, and force all indigenous groups to hunt more and more bison, is his contention that the HBC enjoyed a Monopsony after 1821— that is a market where it was the only buyer.⁷ This stance flies in the face of almost all evidence. While the Cree, Assiniboine, Blackfoot and Metis provided immense quantities of pemmican to the HBC, they always had American traders to whom they could trade their furs, robes, and provisions,⁸ and for

⁷ George Colpitts, *Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains, 1780 - 1882* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 151.

⁸ John E. Sunder notes that there were at least 24 American trading posts on the Upper Missouri close to the 49th parallel. As well he notes that dried buffalo meat and pemmican had found a growing market in St. Louis and points east. See John E. Sunder, *The Fur trade on the Upper Missouri 1840-1864* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 17, 39, 45. Dried Buffalo meat and pemmican were the most important food sources on the Upper Missouri, and by 1831, it was estimated that half of this meat and pemmican was supplied by the Indigenous bands of the region. See David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840: A Geographical Synthesis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 100-101. The Assiniboine and Cree bands in the British territories were the principal Indigenous traders at Fort Union. They traded southwards because of their activity in the pemmican trade, and their participation in the robe trade at Fort Union increased their pemmican trade there. See Barton H. Barbour, *Fort Union and the Upper Missouri Fur Trade* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 7 124, 195.

most periods there were free traders in Rupert's Land who acted as trading agents for American buyers. In 1827 the HBC was compelled to re-establish Fort Dauphin to combat these Free Traders,⁹ and in 1828, the Company felt it necessary to re-open Brandon House (it had been closed in 1824) to combat American traders established south of the Turtle Mountain.¹⁰ In 1830, they opened a post on the Assiniboine River, near the Qu'Appelle, to attract the Cree and Assiniboine bands going to trade with the American on the Missouri. While they got few furs from them, they traded in Buffalo provisions and leather to attempt to undercut these American traders.¹¹

By the 1840s, free traders operated from Red River to the Rockies providing competition for the HBC in the purchase of furs and provisions. By the 1840s, John Rowand, the Chief Factor at Edmonton, was driven to distraction. He claimed the Metis of Lac Ste Anne, and the Freemen of Portage La Loche and Lac La Biche were eroding his trade in furs and provisions. They were refusing to trade with him because his prices were too low, and they were taking their trade to Red River. When he threatened to arrest them, they dared him to do it, declaring it was their country and they would have justice. The Metis of Lac Ste Anne, he complained, had declared the country open to free trade both in furs and pemmican. They refused to hunt for the Company, and were

⁹ George Simpson Report to the London Committee, 25th June 1827. HBCA D.4/90, fo.29.

¹⁰ George Simpson's Report to the London Committee, 10th July 1828. HBCA D.4/92, fo. 45.

¹¹ George Simpson's Report to the London Committee, 26th September, 1830. HBCA D.4/97, fo. 30. George Simpson's Report to the London Committee, 18th July 1831. D./498, fo. 26.

going to the plains to hunt buffalo, driving the herds out of range of Edmonton's fort hunters.¹² This is hardly a trader who thought he operated in a Monopsony.

In the Red River district, things were little different and the Red River Colony also constituted a separate purchaser. Colpitts notes that the Company attempted to prohibit settlers from using their own goods to purchase food from native hunters,¹³ but does not mention that this initiative by George Simpson was soundly repudiated by the London Committee of the HBC. In 1822-23, John Clarke, the Chief Factor, placed in charge of the Red River district by Simpson, tried to prevent any settler holding a land grant, from trading in provisions. When the governor of the Red River Settlement, Andrew Bulger, complained to the Governor and London Committee of the HBC, the Committee immediately wrote to George Simpson, that Clarke had misconceived the rights of the HBC. They told Simpson that the Company had no right, nor was it their intention, to prevent settlers from procuring skins or provisions for their consumption.¹⁴ A chastened Simpson wrote back that "We shall not hereafter interfere with the Settlers in regard to trading leather and provisions from the Indians."¹⁵

¹² John Rowand to George Simpson, 16 August 1844, HBCA D.5/12, fo. 185. John Rowand to George Simpson, HBCA D.5/12, fo. 528. John Rowand to George Simpson, 25 August 1846, HBCA D.5/18, fo. 187. John Rowand to George Simpson, 1 January 1846, HBCA D.5/16, fo. 15bd.

¹³ George Colpitts, *Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains, 1780 - 1882* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 155.

¹⁴ Letter from Governor, Deputy Governor and Committee of the Hudson Bay Company to George Simpson, 21 May 1823. LAC, Bulger Correspondence, M. 151, p. 215.

¹⁵ George Simpson to Andrew Colvile, 8 September 1823. LAC, Selkirk Papers, C-8 Volume 25, pp. 8011-8044.

A brief perusal of the Winnipeg Post Journal between 1824 and 1830¹⁶ shows not only that the HBC was not in control of prices, but that the settlers of the Red River Settlement were active traders. In October of 1824, the HBC traded for provisions from a freeman who forced the Company to pay a much higher price than usual.¹⁷ On February 23, 1825, the journal notes that settlers had outbid the company by at least one-half for provisions.¹⁸ In March of 1825 it was noted that the rich in the settlement were purchasing all kinds of provisions at enormously high prices,¹⁹ and that the freemen were charging much more for provisions owing to the scarcity of buffalo that season.²⁰ In the fall of 1826, with a famine in the Colony, dried provisions were selling at double the usual cost,²¹ at what the HBC labelled as exorbitant prices.²² At the same time, the journal keeper noted that the HBC had competition from American traders at Pembina, Grand Forks, and Brandon. In January of 1827, American traders at Grand Forks were presenting such ruinous competition that the petty traders outfitted by the HBC were shut down in the area.²³ Cuthbert Grant, licensed by the HBC to trade in the Brandon House area noted that he had heavy oppositions from American traders, and that he found it hard to compete.²⁴ In the fall of 1827, pemmican prices in the

¹⁶ There are no post journals for the Winnipeg Post from 1831-39, and 1840-51.

¹⁷ Winnipeg Post Journal for October 9, 1824, HBCA B.235/a/6, fo. 15.

¹⁸ Winnipeg Post Journal for February 23, 1825. HBCA B.235/a/6 fo. 24d

¹⁹ Winnipeg Post Journal for March 17, 1825. HBCA B.235/a/6 fo. 26d.

²⁰ Winnipeg Post Journal for March 18, 1825. HBCA B.235/a/6 fo. 27.

²¹ Winnipeg Post Journal for August 11, 1826. HBCA B.235/a/8 fo. 2.

²² Winnipeg Post Journal for September 9, 1826. HBCA B.235/a/8 fo. 4d.

²³ Winnipeg Post Journal for January 1, 1827. HBCA B.235/a/8, fo. 13.

²⁴ Winnipeg Post Journal for January 4, 1827. HBCA B.235/a/8, fo. 13d.

settlement were again exorbitant.²⁵ By October of 1827, prices of pemmican had begun to come down as there was more food in the settlement and the crops had been harvested.²⁶ In August of 1828 freemen were selling pemmican at reduced prices because the HBC was buying none.²⁷ My point here is that there were numerous purchasers at Red River, prices were very high to low, and the prices varied according to supply and demand. This was not a monopsony.

The Price of Pemmican

Colpitts seldom discusses the price of purchasing pemmican from Indigenous groups for this is a very difficult to determine given that pemmican and other provisions were most often purchased with cloth, ammunition, goods, alcohol, and tobacco. For example, in 1822, John Pritchard at Pembina, wrote to John Clarke, the Chief Factor at Red River, that his chief mode of paying freemen for furs and provisions was $\frac{1}{2}$ in fine goods and $\frac{1}{2}$ in ammunition, rum, tobacco which were charged at a high rate.²⁸ Indeed, Colpitts bases his analyses of the price of pemmican on the “book value” or “transfer value” of pemmican in the HBC system. That is the price in sterling that the HBC put on pemmican transferred from one post to another, or in its stores. This “price” or “tariff” is at best a proxy of what the HBC paid its Indigenous supplies, and a poor one

²⁵ Winnipeg Post Journal for August 9, 1827 and August 14, 1827 HBCA B.235/a/9 fos. 5d-6.

²⁶ Winnipeg Post Journal for October 25, 1827. HBCA B.235/a/9 fo. 12.

²⁷ Winnipeg Post Journal for August 6, 1828. HBCA B.235/a/12, fo. 2.

²⁸ John Pritchard to John Clarke, September 27, 1822. HBCA B.235/b/1, fos. 2-3.

at that. It is an accounting method for country provisions in the system, and an attempt to instill a purchasing discipline on its traders.

On the basis of these HBC “book values” Colpitts asserts that these prices represented the very most the company would pay. There was never such an absolute order given. Minutes of Council, in fact, noted that traders at Red River were to trade at prices as per tariffs established, but were authorized to alter those prices according to circumstances of opposition from traders on the frontier.²⁹ Certainly, post traders would be cognizant that they could not go far over these values if they wanted to show profits for their district, but they could fudge all manner of purchases in alcohol, tobacco, powder and other goods. As well, when there were crisis situations, they exceeded these book values. Using these book values, Colpitts also states that after 1826, the HBC “Moved pemmican prices to a quarter of their prices from two decades before thus forcing Cree, Assiniboine, and Blackfoot peoples to hunt more to acquire European goods.”³⁰ This seems wrong on the face of it. Firstly, the actual data he presents suggests that the book value in 1826 was exactly the same as it had been in 1811 – that is 4 pence per pound. Indeed, the data he presents for Cumberland (and which is replicated at every post I have looked at) shows that from 1810 to 1870 the book value for pemmican in the HBC system hovered around the 4d per pound value

²⁹ For an example of these kind of exceptions, see Minutes of Council, 1846. HBCA B.239/k/2, fo. 193d.

³⁰ George Colpitts, *Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains, 1780 - 1882* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 151.

– other than the two years during the Fur Trade wars (1814-15), and in the two years immediately after the merger (1821-23).

Figure 1 – Book Value of Pemmican in Pence per lb

YEAR	MINUTES OF COUNCIL	EDMONTON	CUMBERLAND	WINNIPEG
1810-11		4d		
1811-12			4d	
1812-13		4d	4d	
1813-14		4d	4d	
1814-15		4-6d	5d	
1815-16		6	6d	
1816-17				
1817-18				
1818-19				
1819-20				
1820-21				
1821-22		8d	8½d	9d
1822-23	9d	9d	9d	9d
1823-24	4d	4d	4d	4d
1824-25			4d	4d
1825-26	4d	4d	4d	4d
1826-27	4d	4d	4d	4d
1827-28	4d	4d	4d	4d
1828-29		4d	4d	4d
1829-30		4d	4d	4d
1830-31	4d	4d	4d	4d
1831-32		4d	4d	
1832-33	2-3d**	2-3d	2d	2d
1833-34	2-3d	2-3d	2d	2d
1834-35	2d	2d		2d
1835-36	3d	3d	3d	3d
1836-37		3d	3d	2d
1837-38		3d	3d	3d
1838-39		3d	3d	3d
1839-40		3d	3d	2d
1840-41		3d	3d	
1841-42		3d	3d	
1842-43		3d	3d	
1843-44	3d	3d		

1844-45		3d		
1845-46		3d	3d	
1846-47		3d	3d	
1847-48		3d	3d	
1848-49		3d	3d	
1849-50		3d		
1850-51		3d	3d	
1851-52		3d	3d	
1852-53		3d		
1853-54	4-5d	4d	4d	
1854-55	4-5d		4d	4-5d
1855-56	4-5d	4-5d	4d	4-5d
1856-57	4-5d	4-5d		4-5d
1857-58	3½-4d	4d	4d	
1858-59		4d	5d	
1859-60		4-5d		
1860-61		4-5d	4d	
1861-62		4-5d	4d	
1862-63		4-5d	4d	
1863-64		4-5d	4d	
1864-65		4-5d	4d	
1865-66		4-5d		
1866-67		4-5d	4d	
1867-68		4-5d		
1868-69	6-7d			
1869-70				

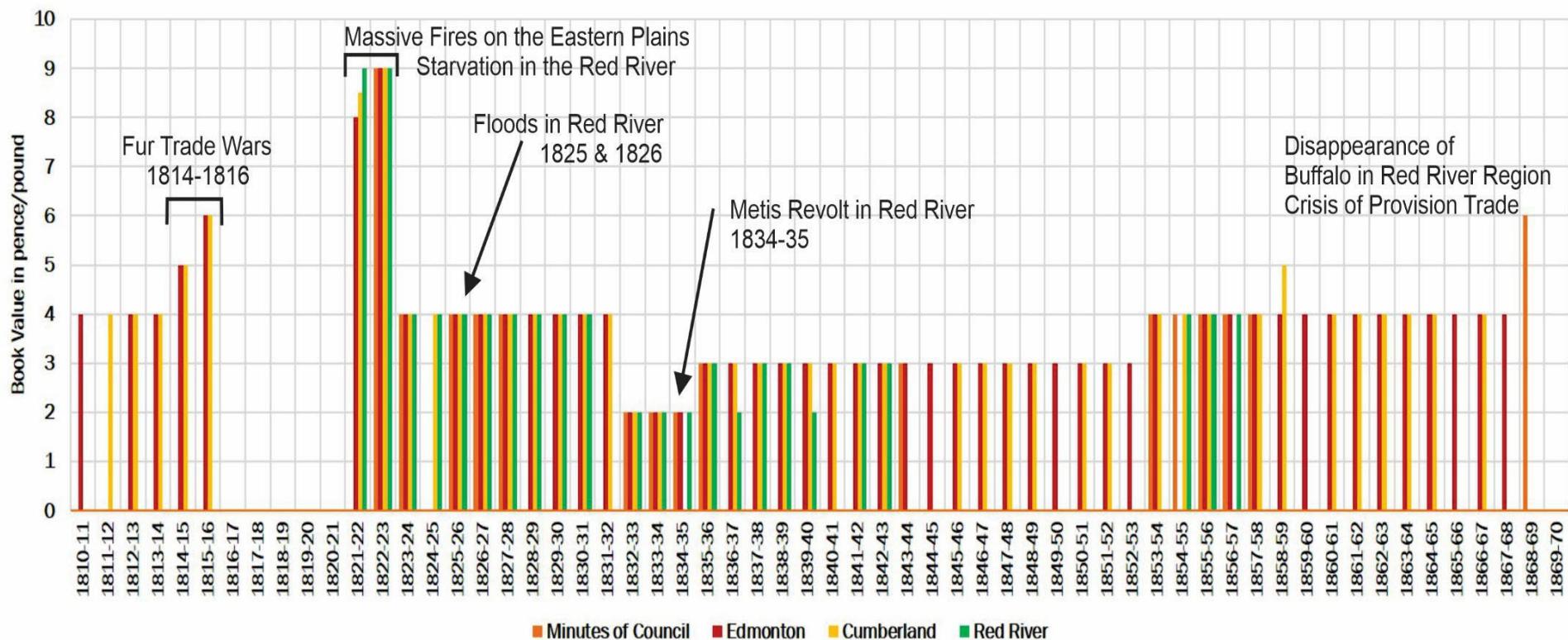
** These variable prices reflect the difference between “Fine” and “common” pemmican

Source: Account Books of Edmonton House, Cumberland House, Winnipeg Post, and Minutes of Council, Northern Department 1821-1870.

While I do not doubt that the Metis, Cree, Assiniboine, and Blackfoot peoples hunted more over time to acquire European goods, there is no evidence that I have found that this increased hunting was due to the suppression of prices by the HBC, but rather to the desire for more goods and guns.

I will now provide some context for certain years to show that these proxies, are not a good indication of what the Metis, Cree, Assiniboine and Blackfoot could receive for their pemmican and provisions after 1823.

HBC Pemmican Book Value for Various Posts 1810-1870



Source: HBCA, Account Books of Edmonton House, Cumberland House, Winnipeg Post, and Minutes of Council, Northern Department 1821-1870.

Until 1823, the book value of Pemmican in the HBC system seems somewhat responsive to the various factors that caused an increase of prices paid for pemmican to the various Indigenous groups. That is, the higher book values noted in the period from 1814-1816 (5d to 6d), coincides with the problems provisioning the HBC Athabasca campaign, the struggle to feed the nascent Selkirk Colony, and the provisioning crisis throughout the northern plains in the period from 1811 to 1815.³¹ As well the high book value of pemmican in the period 1821-23 coincides with large fires in the Red River and Pembina region that drove buffalo herds 10 days from the Red River Colony, resulting in wide-spread starvation in the Red River region, and higher prices for provisions in the Red River Colony.³²

Thereafter, as the HBC made an attempt to lower and regularize the price they paid for pemmican by reducing its book value, the more these book values diverged from the observed prices paid for pemmican to Indigenous producers. As Colpitts notes, one of the methods that the HBC used to lower the cost of purchasing pemmican was to license independent traders to bring in provisions for them. In 1824, the HBC contracted with Andrew McDermot (a former HBC employee) to supply them with provisions.³³ The amount of provisions they received from McDermott, however, was

³¹ See Ted Binnema and Gerhard J. Ens, "Introduction," to *The Hudson's Bay Company: Edmonton House Journals, Correspondence, and Report 1806-1821* (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 2012), 52-65.

³² See the Winnipeg Post Journal for 1822-23. HBCA B.235/a/5, and Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State* (M.G. Hurtig, 1972), 57-58.

³³ Winnipeg Post Journal, September 13, 1824, fo. 12.

far short of the quantity they expected, and they were forced to buy provisions from freemen at a much higher cost than usual.³⁴

HBC book prices of pemmican in the succeeding two years are also at variance to what the real price of purchasing pemmican. These were years of flooding at Red River, years when the buffalo hunt out of Red River failed, and when the crops failed at well.³⁵ The whole Red River Settlement ran out of food, and the price for plains provisions was exorbitant. On August 11, 1826, the journal keeper at Red River noted that John R. McKay (an HBC trader who had retired to the Red River Settlement in 1821) had arrived from beyond Brandon with cart loads of provisions and was selling it briskly at double the usual prices of the place.³⁶ None of these price spikes show up in the chart of HBC book prices.

In the period 1834-35, the HBC listed its book value of pemmican at 2d consistent with a glut of pemmican on the market in Red River. According to Alexander Ross, the HBC warned the Metis not to bring in as much buffalo meat, but the Metis would not listen. When the HBC refused to take the excess of the provisions off their hands there was discontent among the Metis, which broke into open revolt at the end of the year when Antoine Larocque was assaulted by an HBC trader named Thomas Simpson. Within days Fort Garry was surrounded by the Metis who threatened violence

³⁴ Winnipeg Post Journal, October 6 & 9, 1824, HBCA B.235/a/6, fos.15.

³⁵ See Winnipeg Post Journals of 1824-25 and 1825-16. HBCA B.235/a/6-7.

³⁶ Winnipeg Post Journal, August 11, 1826. HBCA B.235/a/6, fo. 2.

against the HBC. Only the intervention of Father Antoine Belcourt restored the peace. In return for this peace, the HBC agreed to compensate Antoine Larocque, provide the Metis with rum and tobacco, and agreed to buy provisions at increased prices.³⁷ Rather than overwhelm or impoverish the Metis, it seems W.L. Morton was more correct. Morton noted that the buffalo hunts were uncertain, and the Metis were unable to gauge their hunts by supply and demand. They hunted what they could and when they returned to the Red River Settlement:

Their wish was to sell all they could bring in at a fixed and customary price, and the Company had in large measure to conform to their wishes. For it was not safe to risk their discontent, as the *métis* were a force not to be controlled by the Company, the government of Assiniboia, or the other half of the Colony, all of which lacked the means to overawe the *métis* once aroused.³⁸

My last example to show that HBC book values of pemmican were weak proxies of the price paid for pemmican comes from James Hargrave, an HBC clerk, who wrote that in 1869 the serious decrease in the number of buffalo had produced a crisis in the provision trade. Pemmican, he said, that at one point had sold for 3d was now selling for 1 shilling per pound (1 shilling = 12d).³⁹

³⁷ See Gerhard J. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 54-55, Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, 165-69.

³⁸ W.L. Morton, "Introduction," to *London Correspondence Inward from Eden Cobvile, 1849-1852* (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1956), xxxiv.

³⁹ J.J. Hargrave, *Red River* (1871), 170.

The HBC “Quota” System

The last part of Colpitts’ argument arguing that the HBC had the power to drive down pemmican prices and control the Metis producers of Pemmican, deals with what he terms a “Quota System” – that is a method of setting a limit on how much pemmican would be purchased at any given point or district. Colpitts argues that the HBC would alternate its pemmican purchases to buy pemmican where it was the cheapest in any of the three plains districts. He writes:

By the mid-1830s, quotas placed on Red River effectively placed the Metis and all plains hunters in the bind of low prices and upward limits to what was purchased from them. Between Red River, Swan River, and Saskatchewan, the company raised or lowered quotas annually. If hunting failed, or prices threatened to rise in any of the areas, the company redirected its purchases elsewhere.⁴⁰

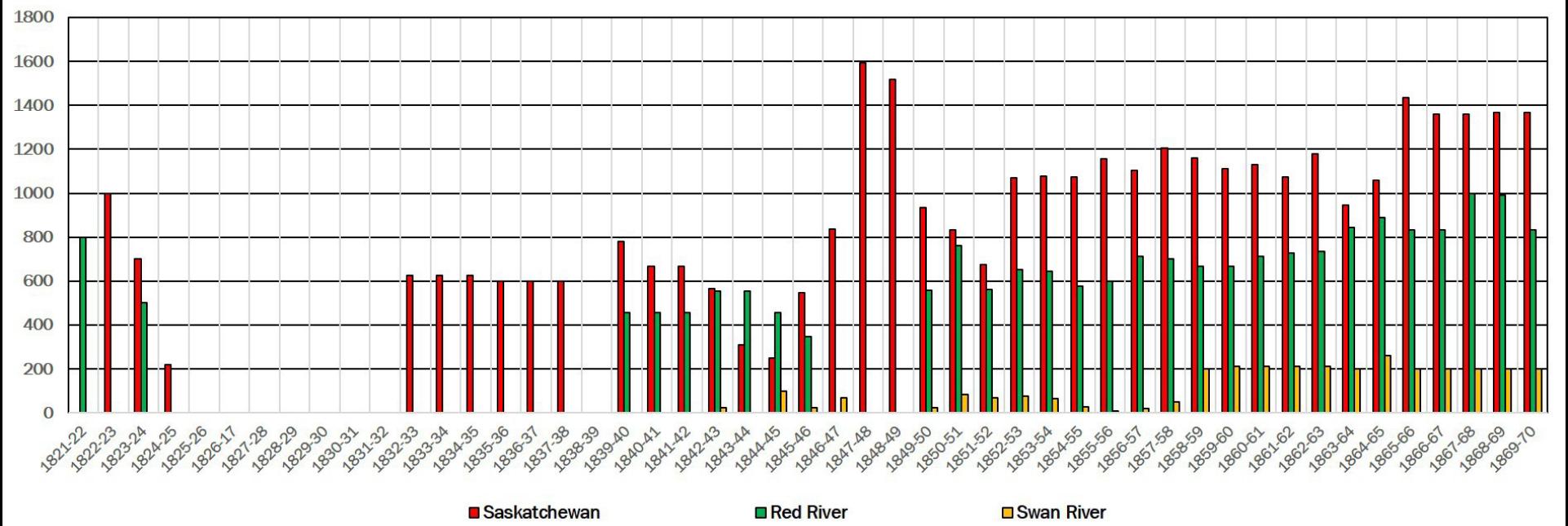
... the company’s regional quota system allowed traders to buy only at low price, taking food alternatively and at its cheapest from any of its three plains districts.⁴¹

As proof, he produces a chart taken from orders in the Minutes of Council from 1821 to 1881. The problem is the HBC never used the word quota in its Minutes of Council, nor meant “quotas”. What these figures represented were requisitions – that is written requests requiring various districts to supply pemmican to Dunvegan, Portage La Loche, Cumberland House, and Norway House for the use of its boat brigades.

⁴⁰ George Colpitts, *Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains, 1780 - 1882* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 180.

⁴¹ Ibid., 183.

Figure 3 Requisitions of Pemmican 1820-1870
By Number of 90 Pound Bags



Source: Data extracted from Minutes of Northern Council, 1821 to 1870. HBCA B.239/k/1-3

These requisitions were meant to ensure that there was enough pemmican for their boat brigades given the supply of pemmican was variable throughout the plains. As well, these requisitions did not prevent any post or district from purchasing more pemmican/provisions than was noted in order to feed the inhabitants of its own posts or its satellite posts. The idea that these requisitions were a strategy of lowering the cost of purchasing pemmican, and pitting native hunters against each other in the market⁴² is nowhere articulated. The only place Colpitts is correct in this argument, is that these requisitions did overcome the uncertainties of the northern plains climate and availability of pemmican.

A closer look at the chart for the requisition of pemmican (Figure 3) shows little evidence of alternating purchases from one district to another. Disregarding the early years after the union which are hard to analyze, it would appear that the pemmican requisitions for the boat brigades was met throughout the 1830s by the Saskatchewan district (600 bags per year). This is explained in the HBC records not by any reference to price but rather to the exigencies of the Saskatchewan boat brigade. In these years the Saskatchewan district began to provide York boats for other districts and generally set off for Norway house with 10 to 14 boats. They would return with 6 to 7 boatloads of goods. The rest of the boats were left at Norway House for other departments. Rather than travel with boats half empty to Norway House, it made sense to bring more

⁴² Ibid., 184.

pemmican from this district. By the 1840s, with pemmican requirements ever increasing, requisitions were also made at Red River and Swan River. Rather than alternating orders, both the Saskatchewan and Red River were asked to send more and more pemmican.

The only period when it might appear that some significant alternation of requisitions occurred is in the period 1846 to 1849, when Red River requisitions fall to zero. The causes of this drop off of requisitions from Red River had nothing to do with buying pemmican cheaply and driving the price down. It was during these years that British Soldiers were stationed in Red River⁴³ in response to the Oregon Boundary Dispute and a possible American threat at Red River. The insertion of over 300 men to Lower Fort Garry as well as several dozen women,⁴⁴ created significant provisioning needs at Red River. Given that the HBC was expected to do the provisioning, George Simpson informed Alexander Christie, the Chief Factor at Red River, that all provisions raised in Red River were to be reserved for the troops. The fur trade would have to trust the resources of other parts of the country.⁴⁵

In addition to the problem of feeding troops, George Simpson also informed John Rowand, the Chief Factor of the Saskatchewan District, that there had been a failure of crops at Red River in 1846, and few provisions could be obtained there. As a

⁴³ This was The Sixth, or Royal First Warwickshire Regiment of Foot, who arrived in 1846 and left in 1848.

⁴⁴ William R. Morrison, "The Sixth Regiment at Lower Fort Garry," in *Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in the Archaeology and History*, No. 4 (Ottawa: 1970).

⁴⁵ George Simpson to Alexander Christie, November 26, 1846. HBCA D.4/34, fos. 61-61d.

result, Rowand was to use every exertion to collect as many country provisions as he could in his district and bring it to Norway House.⁴⁶ Simpson also informed Rowand that he apprehended a great scarcity of provisions the next year as none could be expected from Red River.⁴⁷ Clearly, this was not part of a quota system to buy pemmican at the cheapest price and oppress the Metis, but was related to the scarcity of pemmican at Red River.

Conclusions

What I have tried to do in this brief paper is moderate some of the claims that the Hudson's Bay Company was a company state that built the British Empire, and came to rule vast numbers of people, over a vast territorial empire. To do this I have examined a few aspects of this claim to power. In particular, I argue that the HBC could not control the provision trade (though it did try to reduce its own costs). That it did not constitute a “Monopsony” in Rupert's Land, that it could not single-handedly drive down the price of pemmican, and that it did not establish a “quota system” to help it do so. Thus, the argument that the HBC used its power to control the price of pemmican and provisions to erode the collective power of the Metis, and force Indigenous groups to hunt more and more bison is erroneous.

⁴⁶ George Simpson to John Rowand, September 2, 1846. HBCA D.4/35, fos. 48-48d.

⁴⁷ George Simpson to John Rowand, September 14, 1846. HBCA D.4/35, fo. 52d. As late as November 1848, Simpson continued to warn Rowand that the scarcity of provisions at Red River could not be overstated. He, Rowand, was to spare no exertion to gather provisions and send them on to Norway House. George Simpson to John Rowand, November 15, 1848. HBCA D.4/38, fo. 58d.