"The Orders of the Dreamed"
George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa
Religion and Myth, 1823
Jennifer S.H. Brown
Robert Brightman
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“The Orders of the Dreamed”: George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823

JENNIFER S.H. BROWN
ROBERT BRIGHTMAN

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A Note About the Pictographs
The images which appear on the part title pages are renderings of ancient pictographs from the Precambrian Shield region of northern Saskatchewan. They were produced by the ancestors of the people currently inhabiting the area, the Rocky Cree, and were made as part of the ritual during which the individual encountered his pawâkan, or guardian.
Illustrations

spirit. The images portray spiritual beings, or the persons met during the vision quest.

Pictograph sites occur along the shorelines of many rivers and lakes in the Canadian Shield region of Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario. The one shown in the frontispiece is the Hickson–Maribelli site north of the Churchill River in northern Saskatchewan. The drawings are smaller than the actual pictographs. The paintings themselves were made with anhydrous iron oxide, known commonly as red ochre, which is found locally in its natural state. The ochre was heated until the red colour had deepened to the hue desired; the resulting powder was mixed with oil, probably from whitefish, and applied to the rock. Over a number of years, the ochre would react with the rock surface until the organic medium had disappeared and only the red stained impression of the painted image remained on the rock face.

Ochre had sacred connotations for the people who produced these images. Ethnographic research conducted by Katherine Lipsett in northern Saskatchewan has shown scholars that the pictographs were made as part of the vision quest ritual. The images produced in the pictographs have not been definitively identified; however there is little doubt about the sacredness of the ritual and the sacred intent of the pictographs.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance and cooperation of several individuals and institutions in the preparation of this book. Several years ago, Sylvia Van Kirk shared with Jennifer Brown her discovery of the Nelson papers; and her researches and enthusiasm are bearing fruit as Nelson’s writings progress into print, and as they are increasingly used and cited (e.g., McNeice 1984, Lytwyn 1986). The Metropolitan Public Library of Toronto, through Edith Firth, former curator of its rare books and documents, and Donald F. Meadows, director of the library, granted both staff assistance and photocopies, as well as permission to publish the text presented here.

Mrs. G. Lebans, Archivist of the Synod of the Diocese of Montreal, patiently went through the registers of Christ Church (Anglican), Sorel, to retrieve Nelson family entries scattered over a seventy-year period. Shirlee A. Smith, Keeper of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg, and her staff, made possible access to and use of the Company’s records relating to Nelson and Lac la Ronge. Without this assistance, our knowledge of Nelson and his contexts would have had serious gaps. In March of 1986, Jennifer Brown was able to visit the presumed site of Nelson’s post at Lac la Ronge, thanks to the enthusiastic help of Katherine Lipsett of the University of Saskatchewan, Lois Dalby of La Ronge, and Tom McKenzie of Stanley Mission, Saskatchewan.

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Finally, but not least, we must express our appreciation to George Nelson himself, in hopes that he would have approved our carrying out of his plans, never fulfilled in his lifetime, to publish his material. Acknowledgment of his contributions in documenting native North American religion and life is long overdue. This book may serve as a slightly late bicentennial commemoration of a writer too long ignored.
In the fall of 1807, John Lambert visited William Henry (Sorel) where the Nelson family lived. Although he found the town attractive with several stores and two churches, it did not appear prosperous. Many local men were voyageurs in the Northwest, leaving the cultivation of their farms to their wives and children (Travels through Canada and the United States of North America, in the Years 1806, 1807, & 1808, 2 vols., London 1816). Illustration from vol. 1, pp. 506–07, courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.
INTRODUCTION

GEORGE NELSON

Background, Career, and Writings
Among Anglo-Canadian fur traders of the early nineteenth century, George Nelson stands out for his interest in the life and ways of the natives he encountered. His writings testify to his willingness to listen seriously and with a relatively open mind to what his Ojibwa and Cree associates had to tell him, and to his attention to detail and eagerness for accuracy. As a fur trade clerk, he served the XY Company (Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Company) from 1802 to 1804, the North West Company from 1804 to 1816 and again from 1818 to 1821, and the Hudson’s Bay Company from 1821 (the time of its merger with the North West Company) until 1823. Yet while attending to business in an evidently competent manner, he also became a good observer and recorder of both the native and non-native people around him. His manuscripts are an invaluable and scarcely tapped resource on all the parties involved in the fur trade social sphere – and particularly on the Indians.

Nelson’s papers are comprised of two major groups of materials: the manuscripts written during his fur trade service, and a body of reminiscences written between 1825 and about 1851, from two to twenty-eight or more years after he left the northwest. The document published here, which belongs to the first group, is, like the great majority of known Nelson material, held by the Metropolitan Public Library of Toronto, Canada.
In form, it is an untitled letter-journal, sixty foolscap pages in length, addressed to George Nelson’s father, William. Internal dates and statements show that it was composed at intervals between March and early June 1823, while Nelson was serving as Hudson’s Bay Company clerk in charge of Lac la Ronge (northeastern Saskatchewan), an outpost of Ile à la Crosse. The Lac la Ronge letter-journal is the last of his texts written in the Indian country, and the only substantial surviving manuscript concerning the final of his nineteen years of fur trade life.

Only one of Nelson’s writings has previously appeared in print – his post-retirement reminiscence of his 1802-03 winter in the St. Croix River valley in northwestern Wisconsin (Bardon and Nute 1947). Some of the other papers bearing on the fur trade are being prepared for publication by Sylvia Van Kirk. The Lac la Ronge text includes relatively little about the fur trade, however, and because it stands apart as an ethnological contribution of high quality and great interest, we decided to annotate and publish it separately. This introduction portrays its author’s background and career, and some of the contexts of his writing and thought. The text itself is reproduced in Part II. Part III, “Northern Algonquian Religious and Mythic Themes and Personages,” places the document in a broad historical and ethnological perspective. In Part IV Stan Cuthand offers a personal commentary on Nelson’s text, reflecting upon his own Cree heritage and his life in two worlds, and Emma LaRocque presents a native scholar’s perspective on publishing historical documents.

**Family and Childhood**

Nelson spent his early years first in Montreal and then in a Loyalist community in Sorel, Lower Canada (now Quebec), about fifty miles down the St. Lawrence River from Montreal. His parents, William, a schoolmaster originally from South Shields, County Durham, England, and Jane Dies, were married in Sorel (or William Henry as it was then known) on 24 May 1785 (Nelson Family Papers 1765; Couillard-Després 1926, 141; Christ Church (Anglican) Registers 1787). Both had been among the many New York Loyalists who came to the Sorel area to escape the American Revolution. George, their eldest child, was born on 4 June 1786. He was followed by at least eight other children. The only two who found fame in their lifetimes were Wolfred and Robert, conspicuous for their roles in the Rebellion of 1837 in Lower Canada (Thompson 1976; Chabot, Monet, and Roby 1972).
George received, and evidently absorbed with success, a sound basic education; both the Lac la Ronge text and his other writings demonstrate considerable literacy and some familiarity with classical mythology and European intellectual currents. But on 13 March 1802, his father and the local notary set him upon a new course, drawing up a five-year contract to engage him in the fur trade as an apprentice clerk with the XY Company (Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Company), the firm which from the late 1790s to 1804 so vigorously challenged the North West Company for the fur trade beyond the Great Lakes (Archives nationales du Québec 1802). There were probably two reasons that William Nelson allowed George to take up this career at so early an age. First, George himself, infected by the examples of many other local youths who took up this adventurous life for what seemed a liberal salary, "was seized with the delirium" of their enthusiasm and campaigned to go (Bardon and Nute 1947, 5–6). Second, the fact that George as the eldest son had by that time six younger brothers and sisters in need of support may have swayed his father's views.

The Wisconsin Years
On 3 May 1802, George left Lachine, the fur traders' departure point near Montreal, in a brigade of six canoes to travel to the depot of Grand Portage on the southwestern shore of Lake Superior; then on 13 September he left there with three men to winter in northern Wisconsin (Bardon and Nute 1947, 6, 144). Nothing in his previous experience except hearsay from returned traders had prepared him for life in the fur trade and among the Indians, and he poignantly recorded his early homesickness and the trials of adjusting to so foreign a setting. Yet he remained open to contact with and involvement in his new world, gaining the Indians' acceptance and support, and even a tie of kinship. As he later recalled, "a mere stripling – how they laughed at, and pitied me alternately. A lad about a year older than myself, took a fancy for me, and treated me as a friend indeed: his father was well pleased, and adopted me in his family" (Brown 1984; see also Bardon and Nute 1947, 150).

In 1803, after a summer visit to Grand Portage, Nelson returned inland in mid-August, to winter in the Lac du Flambeau and Chippewa River areas of northern Wisconsin. Much travelling was necessary during this difficult winter, partly to avoid encounters with hostile Sioux, and partly because of food shortages. While under these stresses, Nelson had three
Map 1. Regions and places known to George Nelson or mentioned in Part III. (Map by Caroline Trottier)