If Aboriginal people were mentioned at all in older accounts of the fur trade, they were invariably described as having played minor and subordinate roles, and becoming quickly and hopelessly dependent upon European technology and supplies. Proving no longer able to provide for themselves, they would have starved without the Europeans' assistance, for which they begged. In his 1958 History of the Hudson’s Bay Company, E.E. Rich noted 'the marked tendency for Indians to become dependent on the traders, and the danger threatening the trader and the Indian alike if shipping failed and they became completely dependent on the resources of the country.' It (sic) fact it was the English who were in danger of starvation without the fish, caribou, and geese supplied to them by Cree hunters. There is no evidence that Cree hunters were reduced to relying on the English - the HBC did not ship food to the bay. Rich's assumptions appear to have been based on a low estimation of hunting and gathering societies widely shared in the non-Aboriginal community. Rich also stressed that Aboriginal people did not respond to the economic forces at work in the fur trade in the way that economists would have expected, as they did not appear to him to show an interest in profits.

This picture changed dramatically through studies published in the 1970s and 1980s by a new generation of historians, as well as geographers, anthropologists, and scholars from other disciplines. They shared the idea that the fur trade was much more than a business enterprise - it was a 'socio-cultural complex' that lasted 200 years, characterized by social interaction between European and Aboriginal peoples, producing an indigenous society. The Europeans had to learn about and adapt to Aboriginal cultures, languages, and lifeways. Long before the arrival of Europeans, Aboriginal people had traded furs and many other goods over geographically immense networks, and Europeans were obliged to adapt to these networks.

The exacting demands and high standards caused European traders to improve the quality of their trade goods. Europeans were forced to bargain within Aboriginal terms of reference, and were obliged to develop the concept of the 'made beaver' (MB) as Aboriginal businessmen wished to bargain over amounts, not official standards. (The 'made beaver' was equivalent to the value of a prime beaver skin, and the prices of all trade goods, other furs, and country produce were expressed in terms of MB.) The trading companies also had to learn to give gifts as a central part of the trading process. The economic behaviour of Aboriginal people was not
sharply different from the profit-driven and market-oriented behaviour of Europeans.

The Cree and Assiniboine were ‘ecologically flexible,’ with an ability to adapt to different habitat zones, and to incorporate new ideas, methods, and technology, all of which allowed them to make rapid adjustments to the changing economic systems. Before the establishment of the HBC, both groups were drawn eastward as trappers in the French-Ottawa system of trade. After 1670, these allied groups quickly assumed the role of middlemen in the HBC trade. They pushed their trapping and trading area northwest with the assistance of European arms. There is an unresolved debate about whether the Cree, and in particular Plains Cree, were situated in the present-day Prairie provinces well before the European fur trade. According to Ray the Assiniboine had an original homeland along the Rainy River east of Lake of the Woods, while the Cree were a woodland people, living around and east of Lake Nipigon.

The story of the French and English battling for control of the trade is but one part of the picture. Various Aboriginal groups also competed with each other. In the early eighteenth century, a great variety of people visited York Factory, the leading centre of trade for the Western interior, but the various Cree and Assiniboine bands increasingly took over control of the inland trade of York Factory. They created a trading blockade, with a virtual monopoly on trade during most of the eighteenth century. They held the upper hand in this trade, and to a considerable extent dictated the terms of trade. The Cree and Assiniboine traded with interior groups, including the Blackfoot and Mandan, and, as they determined the kind and numbers of goods to be made available to them, they ‘largely regulated the rate of material culture change, and to a considerable extent they also influenced its direction.’ As the French traders moved further inland, a pattern evolved of the Assiniboine and Cree trading with both, taking a somewhat different array of goods from each.

In the late eighteenth century, the Cree and Assiniboine began to shift southward as a result of changing economic orientation. When the HBC started to establish inland posts, the middleman role of these groups was undermined, as Europeans could make contact directly with the trapping bands. When the fur trade rapidly spread far and wide in Western Canada in the period from 1763 to 1821, the fur companies encountered supply problems for their increasingly lengthy transportation routes. To ensure adequate provisions, trading houses were
established in the parkland and Plains belts to receive and store pemmican, dried meat and grease.

The former Aboriginal middlemen began to serve as provisioners for trading companies, focusing their activities on the Plains resources, and on the buffalo in particular. By the mid-eighteenth century, horses were in use on the Plains and parklands. The Cree and Assiniboine shifted their primary focus from the exchange of furs to the bartering of dried meat. They frequently exerted their economic power and exploited the vulnerability of the Europeans at these posts. The provisioners often burned the prairies around the posts in late autumn to prevent the bison from approaching them during the winter.

By the end of the period of competition in 1821, in many sections of central and southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan the supply of fur-bearing animals had been depleted. Intensive hunting pressure was a main cause, but in the early nineteenth century disease also greatly reduced the number of beaver. Big-game populations of the eastern forest also dwindled. There was an increase in the consumption of alcohol and tobacco during the era of intense competition in the interior, as lavish gift-giving was undertaken to entice trade. These as well as other trade commodities were now much more accessible at all the new posts.

The Cree and Assiniboine who made the transition to a grassland economy and the buffalo hunt retained an independence from European technologies. They did not, for example, rely upon firearms for hunting buffalo. Guns often required repairs, and the flintlock was not well suited to the cold weather of the Western interior. In contrast, for the people of the forest, participation in the fur trade led to a growing dependence on the trading companies. They required a variety of metal goods, consumed more ammunition, and placed a higher value on cloth and blankets than the groups living in the parklands and grasslands.

(Carter, Sarah, 1999, pp. 50-54. Reprinted with permission from The University of Toronto Press.)
Guiding Questions:

1. How were Aboriginal people depicted in early accounts of the fur trade?
2. What does newer evidence show to be more accurate?
3. In what ways did Europeans adapt to Aboriginal economic traditions?
4. Why did Europeans have to adapt to Aboriginal commerce?
5. How would you characterize Cree and Assiniboine economic ability and methods?
6. After 1670, how did the Cree and Assiniboine show their economic flexibility?
7. How would you describe the Cree and Assiniboine inland trade strategies?
8. How and why did the Aboriginal middlemen roles change in the late eighteenth century?
9. How did the Cree and Assiniboine retain independence from European technologies?