

### 3 “CURIOUS GENTLEMEN”: THE HUDSON’S BAY COMPANY AND THE ROYAL SOCIETY, BUSINESS AND SCIENCE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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*Genre* has been a concept useful to—even identified with—the study of professional communication. Miller’s (1984) oft-cited “Genre as Social Action” while synthesising and advancing principles from 15 years of rhetorical reasoning about genre, also illuminated these principles in applying them to technical communication. Miller’s work mobilised professional-writing researchers to productive inquiry over the next two decades, improving our understanding of both workplace writing and the phenomenon of genre itself.

Workplace contexts also highlighted aspects of genre which might have been, in other contexts, less provocative to theory. While we might ask of any genre, *how do people learn* to recognise rhetorical situations, and learn to respond to them in writing which others recognise as fitting and functional, the genres of professional writing bring this question to a point, owing to institutional investments in that learning. Generations of post-secondary students in applied and professional programmes have taken courses in technical communication, these courses going ahead on the assumption that people could be taught the *writing* independently of their having experience of the *situation*. Giving situation priority over form, new-rhetorical genre theory questioned this assumption.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter re-visits the question of how people learn a genre by presenting the rhetorical history of one writer: an 18th-century trader for the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC). At the same time, this rhetorical history may also call into question assumptions about the uniqueness of our “informa-

tion age,” for, as we will be reminded by this trace of an era of overseas trade and scientific initiative, the 18th century was also a period of “information explosion” and long-distance transmission of data. Amongst our assumptions about our own “global” and informationally-explosive age, there may be some which both invite and constrain applications of new-rhetorical genre theory. While, compared to the study of professional writing, research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) has seen only a few applications of new-rhetorical genre theory, CMC researchers have nevertheless found in genre some opportunities for understanding the promise and challenge of information technologies. CMC researchers have appreciated the role of communities of language users and local situations in making the efficiencies of genre: its ready recognitions and responses. Toms (2001), for example, warns that Web design can put genre efficiencies at risk by imposing a “cookie-cutter” format.<sup>2</sup> But the CMC research context is such that *form* overtakes *situation* in reckoning the global span of information technologies. In surveying problems of information retrieval, CMC theorists propose sorting information by genres—by means of *formal* markers (Crowston & Williams, 2000; Kwasnik, Crowston, Nilan, & Roussinov, 2001). One theorist (Beghtol, 2000) recognizes the cultural contingency of text types—that is, genres’ local motives—but sees the need for, in light of “globalization,” a culturally neutral typology: a universal, sociohistorically transcendent one. From the perspective of this discipline, with its interest in managing organisational behaviours, standardised form secures functional communication across global contexts. Also spanning global contexts, 18th-century trade and science may tell a different story, one which privileges local situation as much as a standardising centre.

The brief history presented in this chapter will suggest that rhetorical motive—the experience of *exigence* (Bitzer, 1968), the feeling that a certain sort of writing *should* be done, *now*—derives not so much from perception of single, narrowly contained “purpose,” as from the articulation of multiple scenes of activity, these articulations themselves capable of linking across great distances, social and spatial. Further, the rhetorical history of this trader-writer is, inescapably, the history of his colleagues and acquaintances, too, for his ways of writing can be shown to be the outcome of social interaction, rather than schooling, or compliance with convention. As products of and contributions to social interaction, these ways of writing are not approaches to an ideal type but contingent replications, resilient but unenforceable opportunities, and incentives to other, unforeseen speech. Although attended to by headquarters, writings from the trade outposts were only sporadically or indirectly or incidentally standardised by the centre, and, being thus unmanageable, were responsive to local contexts, and versatile rather than regular in being so.

*OBSERVATIONS ON HUDSON'S BAY*

Here are some passages from *Observations on Hudson's Bay*, composed in the winter of 1742-1743 by James Isham (1749/1743), trader, Factor and Chief Factor for the Hudson's Bay Company at York Fort and Prince of Wales Fort.

This is how the local people look

The men are for the most part tall and thin streight & clean Lim'd Large bon'd and full breast'ed, their is Very few crooked or Deform'd persons amongst them but well shap'd.... both men & women are for the most part round Visag'd with their nose flatt between the Eyes not unlike a negro ... their Eyes Large and Grey yet Lively and Sparkling. (p. 79)

These are their mortuary practices

If one of a family Dies their nearest friend or Ralations Bur-ries them Very oft'n with most of their Effects when Done is;—They put a pile of wood Like unto a faggott, round the graves, then they make an offering, putting a painted Stick up, some with a cross hanging a hatchet, Bayonett, or Ice Chissel. (p. 93)

Here are some of the berries found around the Fort—gooseberries, currants, and a sort of raspberry

Goose Berries Very plenty but never see any but the black when ripe, some Grow's as high as in England, other's which grow's at this Barren and Rocky place are not above 6 inches high spreading along the Ground.

Currans both Red and black the same in other parts,—Cran-berries Very plenty, as also Huckle berries, or Dew berries.

A Yellow Berrie Grow's here (alias) Borocatomenuck whici is Like unto a Rasberrie for bigness, and tast, but grows on a plant not above 5 inches from the ground, also a Red berrie which in taste Like a Raspberry and also Grows Low. (p. 133)

Here are the birds to be seen, and their feathers

Grey Geese there is a pretty many in the marsh's and fen's in England the same sort as these to the best of my Remembrance, the Natives style's these (Neishcoock) they are grey featherd, black feathers in their wings, some few white feathers in their tail, a white Circle round their Neck, white breast and Belly, with brown Les and feet, and of a Different Call from the weyweys, and much Larger being the Size of an English goose. (p. 121)

There are fish to be found, salmon and others, in their season

Tickomegg which is Like a herring is also Very Numerous, Catching with a Setting net, in the Summer season, when they come from the sea into the Rivers to spawn, some hundreds, and with a sean some thousands at one haw'l, they are a Very soft fish but god Eating, we preserve them with salting as also jack pike trout & perch for the winter time,—perch here is the same as in England, Carp and tench very plenty, silver trout and Sammon trout Very Numerous, and Large, Sammon here is at this river and long the North Coast some Year's Very plenty for ab't 3 months (vizt. From the 1 June to the Last of augt.). (p. 169)

Isham sent his manuscript to London in 1744, addressing it to his employers, “The Honourable the Governour Deputy Governour and Committee of the Hudsons Bay Company London.” Presenting images of distant places to a European audience, Isham’s *Observations* is an instance of a genre well known at the time, and also documented in today’s scholarship. Much of this scholarship is conducted by post-colonial literary study. While not the most recent example of such scholarship, Pratt’s (1992) *Imperial Eyes* is one of the most influential. Neither Isham particularly nor the “Northwest” generally are considered in Pratt’s survey, but her study would locate Isham at the mid-18th-century “Linnaean watershed” (Pratt, 1992, p. 39)—the pitch of taxonomic enthusiasm, which, colourfully described by Pratt, inspired “botanizing” or “herborizing gangs” to go to the ends of the earth in their searches and researches, involved in the “obsessive need” of the metropolis “to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself” (p. 6). From the summit of peak texts—the perspective, that is, of literary study—we get a view of “herborizing” expeditions traipsing through alien lands past surprised locals, and such endeavour could indeed seem obsessive. But a rhetorical perspective offers different views, and

the endeavour appears not so much a pathology—or even an automated convention: less an obsession or a convention even at this moment of standardising taxonomy, than a continuum of everyday experience and multiple motivations. For a rhetorical approach to genre also finds that the epoch-making shift to scientific observation is not a lurch forward or an interruption, but a merger of life-times, career-paths, and institutional collegiality.

## TRADE TALKS

Using methods other than literary-critical ones, we find Isham’s writings not obsessive but practical: that is, sensible business writing. Isham is talking business when, for example, he tells how the Cree typically arrive at the Fort, in organisational formation—“A Captn. or chief comes with a gang of Indians, in this gang they Divide themselves into severall tents or hutts, where their is an ancient man, belonging to Each family, who is officers under the Chief (alias) Uka maw” (p. 82)—and with organisational information—the chief getting an invitation to a preliminary meeting in the Fort to give “Information, of the Strength of his Little army, or Gang of Indians” (p. 84). On the day following the arrival, a round of trade talks begins, for which “they give notice they want to come into the fort to Smoak, in the Callimutt &c.” (p. 84), going in and settling according to a protocol in which the Company rep has a recognised role:

[T]he chief is complimented with a chair, where he plasses himself *by the factor*, the rest sitting upon their Brich round the table [ ... ]- in this manner they sitt Very Demur’r, for some time, not speak a word, tell the Ukemau, Break’s Silence, - he then takes one pipe or Callimutt and *presents itt to the factor*, who Lights itt, having a Young man to hold itt as before mention’d, - when Light *the factor takes the Callimutt* by the midle, and points the small End first to the sun’s Rising, then to the highth or midle of the Day, then at the suns setting, then to the Ground, and with a round turn presents itt again to the Leader, when they all and Everyone cry ho! (which signifies thanks) [ ... ] tell the pipe is Exhausted, they then *Deliver itt again to the factor*, who is to turn it as before observ’d according to their country three or four times round his head, by the midle of the callimutt, then Lay itt Downe upon the skin, when the whole Assembly makes the Room Ring with an Ecco of thanks. (pp. 84-85, emphasis added)

Setting out trade demands, the chief reminds the factor of previous agreements—“You told me Last year to bring many Indians, you See I have not Lyd. Here is a great many young come with me, use them Kindly!” (p. 85)—and of competing trade opportunities – “we come a Long way to See you, the French sends for us but we will not here, we Love the English” (pp. 85-86). The chief also complains about the previous year’s trade goods: the powder was in “short measure and bad, I say!” (p. 85), leading to great want in the winter. The chief specifies the quality of guns to be received in trade (“Light guns small in hand, and well shap’d, with Locks that will not freeze in the winter”), the design of kettles to be traded, and he complains of short measure of the cloth received previously (p. 86). The chief recommends his people for fair and generous dealing: “The young men Loves you by coming to see you, take pity, take pity I say! – and give them good, they Love to Dress and be find, do you understand me!” (p. 86).

As well as being a job description for factors, the account answers business interest at every point. Although the Company enjoyed exclusive trade rights across wide territories, this was a domain in principle only without its substantiation in commercial activity, a flow of goods from London to the “Northwest” and back again. The exchange of valuable furs for nearly worthless trinkets—beads or other frippery—is legend, but the actual terms of trade were more onerous. Many scholars emphasise how quickly aboriginal people became economically and culturally dependent on European goods, and how quickly they became discriminating consumers of firearms, iron utensils, and textiles—as well as decorative or amusing items. Already we see that Isham’s descriptions of the trade-meeting genres are, for all their openness today to literary interpretations as “othering,” or as steps preliminary to what Pratt calls “planetary consciousness,” finely tuned to commercial exigence. How was the market responding to the goods on offer? The Company needed this information to specify manufacture and to calculate optimum cargoes, to maximise investment in the best years, to avoid ruin in the worst. As Innis’ (1962/1930) monumental *The Fur Trade in Canada* demonstrates in its exhaustive publication of bills of lading, account books, and financial statements, even commodities relatively cheap near their point of manufacture accrued value in their expensive transport. And even a monopoly could not guarantee a profit: the wrong trade goods, or defective ones, shipped at great cost to an indifferent market or to a market disappointed in previous purchases, could cancel the advantages of monopoly, and rack up losses rather than profits.

Besides, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s monopoly was only national. The French enjoyed trade relations with many aboriginal groups and were often able to offer more appealing goods and terms—opportunities for comparison shopping—and also diplomatic assurances in the politics of aboriginal na-

tions' interrelations. So Isham's description of trade talks including mention of "the french" answers immediate policy concerns and also political ones, for the Company's monopoly was under attack in this period, as London financial interests hostile to the Company stoked controversy over the seriousness of the Company's territorial efforts.

The Company's agents were under instructions to treat their indigenous trading partners with leniency and mildness, to benefit the Company's investment by encouraging trust. Isham's long report of trade talks demonstrates the trader's address—ease, attentiveness, rhetorical command of a complex situation—and also his alertness to his employers' interest. Even the reports of the leave-taking disseminate information useful to the Head Office. When the actual trading has been done, the Chief addresses "his gang of Indians," giving instructions and urging unity and accord—"Do not Quarrell or Leave one another"—stipulating a rendezvous location, and engaging the hunters to meet him again at the fort in the spring, to trade once more, in light of the fair treatment they have enjoyed so far. This report of speech offers a glimpse of the indigenous system of distribution and wholesaling of goods, an economic geography beyond the company's trade offices. With trade-driven increases in hunting activity, beaver populations declined: chasing these dwindling numbers, European traders needed to know about aboriginal groups ever more remote from the first installations. The established forts were a world away from the London investment milieu, but locations of hunters with access to the receding beaver populations were even further away. Information about these locations could be extrapolated from published "voyages" or "travels," but more reliably it came from indigenous people: what they had seen, or heard of—spaces beyond the narrow scope of tenuously provisioned forts in a country far from the familiar scene of metropolitan investment and shareholding. Report of the Cree traders' speech may send the metropolis a sense of its Other, but it also offers intelligence of an unknown hinterland, informing both geographical and capital speculation.

Calculating risk and opportunity, the Company's London committee required extensive reporting from their factors, to correct the Committee members in their assumptions, and to inform their decisions (Rich, 1949). In the field, the traders wanted to write, and they wanted the Committee to read—to span the distance from field to Head Office. Without the organisational genres which queried and instructed, and those which answered, the trade was impossible. Neither could go on without the other.

So other sections of the *Observations* describe snares for deer, traps, snowshoes, canoes. All these are links in the contact between Europeans and North Americans: aboriginal people hunted and harvested for the traders, provisioning them locally; they manufactured snowshoes and canoes for them. We have seen Isham's

catalogues of berries and fishes: these also answered questions about reducing cost by local provisioning. But the contact zone is not restricted to only immediate commercial concerns. Descriptions of indigenous games and adornments, matrimonial customs and fertility, the sweat lodge, the construction of a cradle board (“They have no Notion of cradles for children as the English has, but use other methods, which seem’s much better ... ” [p. 105])—all these can be read as answers to the Committee’s standing question: who are our trade partners?

Still, though, the cradle-boards might begin to seem a bit surplus to business concerns—as does some other information. It is good to know, for example, about geese when local provisioning is an issue, but does the Committee need to know that the birds are “grey featherd, black feathers in their wings, some few white feathers in their tail, a white Circle round their Neck, white breast and Belly, with brown Legs and feet” (p. 121)? The surplus is perhaps most evident in Isham’s description of the beaver—the main article of trade. In the published version of the *Observations*, the beaver gets more than seven pages of scrutiny of its size (“they are Very Large with the wester’n Indian’s, having seen some of Large as an ordinary Calves skin, and to the Northwd. they are very small ... ” [p. 143-144]); colour (“for the most part brown, some black, and some few white” [p. 144]), glands (“the oyley stones or two small bladders ... Contains an oyley Substance, which they style (wetuappaca) these Lyes next the Gendering stones the oyley Substance the Natives uses in trapping Rubbing the baits with itt, ... itt having a Very strong cent” [p. 144]); the construction of the lodges—including their fabulous architecture (“the inside is Spacious and Divided into 3 parts, one for their food, another for their Extrements, and the third where they Lye, having water under and Kep’t as clean as any human person cou’d do” [p. 146]); and the techniques and economy of the beaver’s capture: nets or traps; the rating of pelts by size (“Whole,  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ , and  $\frac{1}{4}$  beaver” [p. 147]); the distribution of the value of the hunt (“When Severall Indians is together, they have sett Rules to the right of the Beaver skin, which is;—if one finds a beaver house, all the Rest goes with and assists him to Kill them, he that found the house having all the skins, and the flesh Equally Divided” [p. 147]) . Isham draws a detailed sketch, with 30 captions, of the beavers and their abode, and the customary activities of their human predators (pp. 148-149). Does central decision-making require all this information?

## THE MAKING OF A “CURIOUS GENTLEMAN”

One way of addressing this question is to ask another: how did James Isham come to write this way? He was an “ordinary man” (Rich, 1949, p. lxxvii), and



“untrained” (Houston, Ball, & Houston, 2003, p. 12). Son of a London family of which there is apparently little record, Isham was apprenticed to the Hudson’s Bay Company at 16 – “an obscure lad” (Houston et al., 2003, p. xiii) literate and educated enough to be a good candidate for training in accountancy, but without other “technical training” (p. lxviii), and without the literary experience of men from privileged positions. Typically, the Company recruited its agents from charitable institutions whose clients were the urban working classes—Grey Coat Hospital School, mainly, and Christ’s Hospital School (Blue Coat)—and also from the Orkney Islands, from whose harbours the company’s annual ships sailed, and whose eligible populations, while reliably educated to an adequate level, had lower wage expectations than the English or Irish (Houston et al., 2003; Houston & Houston, 2003; Innis, 1962/1930; O’Leary, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2002). Business historians have recently analysed the Company’s management techniques as particularly effective in inspiring these boys to identify with Company interests and practices—loyalties crucial for the success of long-distance administration (O’Leary et al., 2002). (At the same time, in this period and later, the Company struggled with the problem of “private trading”—officers and employees in collusion with the Company’s ship captains in carrying privately acquired trade goods, free-lance, back to European markets.)

In the field, the young recruits’ education was up-graded with opportunities to learn accounting, map-making and surveying, and celestial observation (Houston et al., 2003). But these opportunities did not include instruction in ethnography or natural history. How did Isham—a child of the working classes sent to remote parts to live amongst small groups of men of similar background—come to know to write ethnographically, or in a naturalist’s style—to compose beyond immediate commercial concerns? Or to know his employers’ interest in such matters? There are traces of how this “ordinary man” came to the travel genre: how, unschooled, he came not only to know how to compose his *Observations* but also to know to do so—to experience exigence, and rhetorical motive.

Isham absorbed some of the rhetorical attitude of his mentor and predecessor, James Knight, who in 1714 took re-possession of York Fort from the French under the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht. Knight was an emphatic correspondent of the London Committee—demanding that his metropolitan employers take the trouble to read his dispatches if they wanted to overcome their ignorance: Isham’s 20th-century editor says Isham’s supervisor “set the tone” (Rich, 1949, p. xxxiii). As well as absorbing “the tone” from his co-workers, Isham was sometimes explicitly directed in his writing by the London Committee: “your Several letter is not wrote in Paragraphs which you must not fail to observe for

the future answering distinctly each Paragraph of our Letter” (as cited in Rich, 1949, p. xxxvi). Factors were also directed by the Committee to “send home the roots of herbs, plants and shrubs, with seeds, berries and kernels, whilst the surgeons should identify them by their Indian names and list their qualities” (Rich, 1949, p. xxxvi). Isham sent four boxes of plants from York Factory in 1737, and again in 1738 (Houston et al., 2003). While the Committee did not tell their factor *how* to write his *Observations* in the winter of 1743, or *to* write them, and neither did his education school him to these efforts, Isham’s Company journals, his Inward Letters, his accounting, his annotations on boxes of specimens, his correspondence with these worldly men at headquarters familiarised him with a quality of interest in the world.

In addition, Isham had at least two periods of friendly personal contact with Captain Christopher Middleton<sup>3</sup>—“a ship’s captain who worked for the Company and who showed a genuinely scientific interest in Polar navigation and geography” (Rich, 1949, p. xlvi), a Fellow of the Royal Society who had read not only all the Company’s reports on the topic but everything else he could find (p. lv). And, besides his collegial friendship with the scientifically-minded Middleton, there is Isham’s ornithology. “I have made itt my Buisness” he writes, “to gaine the Names of all the different sorts and Kinds of fowl’s in these parts” (p. 119). His ornithology was in part a collaboration with indigenous people. Describing, for example, what he says is called a “water crow” (p. 125), his information goes beyond his firsthand examination of the specimen to places and times he has not witnessed: “Long hairy feather’s on the crown of the Head, I Never see but two of these crow’s which was Brought me by upland Indian’s, who gott itt at the back of this Island (York fort) wer’e they are but scarce” (p. 126). But Isham’s notice of this bird was not simply a result of discussions with Cree traders or his own spontaneous interest in birds. It was a manifestation of the network which led to his contact with natural-history interests in London, especially with George Edwards, “Father of British ornithology” (Houston et al., 2003, p. 16), and “a friend of Linnaeus.” Isham “probably first met George Edwards on [his 1745-1746] furlough” (Houston et al., 2003, p. 42), presenting Edwards with boxes of well preserved “Furs of Beasts, and ... skins of ... Birds,” earning the recipient’s gratitude and recognition of him as a “curious Gentleman” (Edwards qtd. in Houston et al., 2003, p. 45). Isham was also “in touch” with Edwards in London again two years later. Edwards published seven volumes of natural history, including four volumes of *A Natural History of Birds*, the third volume including illustrations of thirty species, the specimens of which were provided by James Isham. Twelve specimens provided by Isham and painted by Edwards became the “official type specimens” for species then named by Linnaeus (Houston et al., 2003, p. 45).

This connection with the scientific élite, earning Isham personal credit for his astute observation and careful collecting, was not an eccentric hobbyism on his part. The Hudson's Bay Company was itself involved in the science of the times: founding members and several shareholders were fellows of the Royal Society (Houston et al., 2003). Exemplary of these dual memberships in the 18th century is Samuel Wegg—inheriting and purchasing Company shares; becoming a fellow of the Royal Society in 1753 and a member of the Hudson's Bay Company Committee in 1760, and deputy governor in 1774. While he served as Governor in 1782-1799, Wegg encouraged both the general reception of Company records by Royal Society members and, as well, individual correspondence by Hudson's Bay Company employees (Houston et al., 2003). So we find, for just one example, in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* of 1772, "An Account of the Birds sent from *Hudson's Bay*; with Observations relative to their Natural History; and *Latin* Descriptions of some of the most uncommon," by Johan Reinhold Forster, an eminent figure in scientific circles and official naturalist aboard Cook's second voyage. For all his travels, Forster never did visit the Bay himself, but derived his science from information making its way across great distances, dispatched by observers and collectors only indirectly instructed by the Linnaean standard. As Forster writes in a sequel, "An Account of some curious Fishes sent from *Hudson's Bay* ... in a letter to *Thomas Pennant*," published in 1773, "The Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company presented The Royal Society with a choice collection of skins of quadrupeds, many fine birds, and some fish, collected by their servants at the several ports in Hudson's Bay; the Committee of the Royal Society, for examining and describing these curiosities, did me the honour to refer them to me for examination." Only indirectly informed of the standard of description and examination, the Company's employees were more directly schooled by their immediate social connections and proximities to institutional practice.

And what about Isham's reading—usually our first resort when we are tracing a writer's inspiration? What access did Isham, in his remote post, have to models of ethnographic or natural-history writing? While some other writer-traders are likely to mention their readings in natural history and travels, and Isham is less likely to do so, he was not unread. We know that he read Capt. Middleton's travel book (*Vindication of the Conduct of Captain Christopher Middleton* 1743), possibly in manuscript, for he quotes from it in his *Observations* (p. 72). And not only is Isham's *Notes and Observations on a Book Entitled A VOYAGE TO HUDSON'S BAY IN THE DOBBS GALLERY &C 1746 & 1747 Wrote by Henry Ellis* (1748)—composed as contribution to the Company's defense of its monopoly—the clearest possible evidence that he read Ellis' travels, he also criticises the book in terms which show that he is familiar with more

than this one instance of the genre. “I observe its a common Rule,” he begins, “with some persons that writes a history of Voyages &c. for want of a proper and just Subject to make a complete Book; they Enlarge upon things which is neither consistent with truth, justice, nor honour ... ” (Isham, 1949/1743, n. p.), and proceeds, in the way of travel writers then and now, to correct the reports of others.<sup>4</sup>

Isham got to know a version of the travel genre presentable to his employers as it was instantiated in the intersections of metropolitan holdings, transit, and administration, directing his attention to the world in certain ways: singling out animals for comparison with known species, collecting seeds and cuttings in small boxes for transport, interrogating local people on territories and routes. This attention translated to the *Observations*. He sent specimens to natural historians in London, and had their reply, and was received by them in person. Like other traders, he kept accounts, wrote up his experiences for the Committee, and knew or corrected the assumptions which prompted their questions. There is no evidence that he was widely read, and its absence suggests that he was not as well read as some of his predecessors or successors. But the annual ships brought books, magazines, and newspapers. And Isham did know some instances of the travel genre, and was friendly with people who, like Captain Middleton, were well-versed.

Tracing the career of an “ordinary man” this way, we get a picture of genre knowledge as acquired through social interaction: through being involved with others in various ways in various activities. If we see genre emerging from such collegial but also fortuitous, intermittent, and interrupted social interaction, then genre must be a precarious phenomenon—and also robust, to survive such interruptions. A series of entries in Isham’s *Observations* on effects of the cold climate can help us understand robustness in precariousness.

In his workplace on the shores of Hudson Bay, Isham was impressed by the cold: “Beer, wine, brandy spirits &c. sett out in the ope’n air for three or four hour’s, will freeze to Solid Ice, not only so, but have known by the Extreimity of the cold, a two gallon Botle of water to freeze solid by the stove side, in the houses we Dwell in” (Isham, 1743/1949, pp. 69-70). He describes the permafrost (“in Dig’ing three or four foot downe in the ground in the mid’st of the summr. you shall find hard froze’n Ice” [p. 71]), and the effects of ice (“It’s a most Surprizing thing and past belief to I’agine the force and Effects the Ice has in these parts” [p. 75]). Provoking surprise and disbelief, these reports could be attributed to general exigence which “marvels” answer: the rhetorical imperative in something so wonderfully out of the ordinary that it secures by contrast what is normal, or regular at home. Isham’s recount of the effects of the cold on the living conditions of Company men could be read as a thrill for the

sedentary: "Notwithstanding [the two-foot stone walls of the fort, the shuttered windows, and large, well fuelled stoves] in 4 or 5 hour's after the fire is out and the chimnly still close stop't, the inside wall of our housses are 6 to 8 inches thick of Ice, which is Every Day cutt away with Hatchetts" (p. 173). Marvellous as they are, however, these reports also contribute to practical debates about the architecture of the forts, and the cost of maintaining a commercial office in this distant place. And the measure of interest extends still further. Writing during the Little Ice Age, Isham and traders like him were not alone in their attention to the cold. Records of the Royal Society preserve many observations on the effects of cold, including experiments on freezing points, some of these experiments conducted by a later factor at York Fort. Isham's friend Captain Middleton reported on the arctic cold in the Society's *Transactions* ("The Effect of Cold; together with Observations on the *Longitude, Latitude, and Declination of the Magnetic Needle, at Prince of Wales's For, upon Churchill-River in Hudson's Bay, North America,*" 1742). Climate was a topic of wide intellectual interest, reaching the bone-chilled personnel at the Bay. The Company's meteorological records, including Captain Middleton's own records for 1730, were submitted to and published by the Royal Society. Andrew Graham, Isham's friend and immediate successor, and author of his own *Observations*, was amongst those who reported their research into cold conditions, from both technical measures—"it appears by observations made at York Fort and Severn River the mercury on Farenheit's standard thermometer was oftentimes at 63° standard thermometer below the cipher" (Graham, 1969, p. 3)—material attempts: "I have ordered a hogshead full of water to be put out into the open air and in forty-eight hours it became solid ice and burst the cask" (Graham, 1969, p. 4). And here again, even as we can trace a scientific attitude in rhetorical response to the cold, a commercial practice shows up: by checking the freezing point of barrels of spirits, Company employees could report by how much the contents had been watered.

Equally, Isham's descriptions and inventory of creatures in the Company domain answer commercial questions about possible opportunities for trade in other furs and about local food sources which could alleviate the expense of provisioning the forts from London. Rabbits (Isham, 1949/1743), partridge, deer, eel and herring, salmon and shellfish, for example, are all accounted for in their abundance or seasonal scarcity, and in their palatability, and often in terms of their parallel to varieties known in England. But again the scope of interest extends beyond the practical questions about provisioning, and collating foreign fish and game with standards of an English diet. These animal species and their fluctuating populations also figure in Natural History: reports of them contributed to contemporary debates on bird and animal migrations and seasonal coloration.

Similarly the beaver information, in its science exceeding requirements for central decision-making but also indicating commercial practice, is a response to rhetorical exigence *overdetermined* by social experience: the trade, the science, the exotic encounter with marvels (a creature with a suite of rooms hygienically designed). If we want to know what makes people write—not only know how *to* write as they do, but know to write, feel that a certain sort of thing *should* be written *now*, now being for Isham the remote winter of 1743—then we can think of genre in terms of rhetorical motive springing from social experience overdetermined by multiple, interlacing scenes of activity: here, journey, trade, science. Genres answer not one immediate, contained purpose: this would not be enough to account for motive—the feeling that a certain kind of thing *should* be written, now, that it is proper to do it and the writer wants to do it, and gets credit for it. To be this kind of robust, conscientious action, genres have to be manifestations of consciousness overdetermined by multiple scenes of social interaction.

## REPLICATED INFORMATION

Thorough and versatile in its reply to standing questions raised by multiple scenes of activity, the beaver information's surplus to decision-making can be measured not only in its extent but also in its replications. Just as Isham's reports on the cold are replicated elsewhere, his account of the beaver is far from the sole instance of the information. The method of capture is also reported in Ellis (1748) (and corrected by Isham, 1748). Like Isham, Andrew Graham reports size and colour; glands; the construction of the lodge—materials, fabulous architecture (“They have three apartments; one may be called the dining-room, another the bed-chamber, and the third is converted in to a necessary apartment which they frequently clean out, carrying the soil and filth to a considerable distance from the house”), and engineering of water level; and the techniques of capture (Graham, 1969, pp. 8-9), including the rating of the trapped animals by size and the means of distributing the value of the hunt. Other details, such as the beavers' diet and their felling of trees for construction, are also parallel. As Isham's successor and protégé, Graham probably had access to Isham's journals and possibly to drafts of his *Observations*, which, although submitted to the London Committee in 1744 was unpublished till 1949. Ellis, as agent for a faction hostile to HBC interests, could not so easily have known these documents—although the Company's practice of circulating and copying documents from the Northwest made a kind of quasi-publication which reached a larger audience than our idea of manuscripts suggests to us today. In any case,

Isham’s interest in writing about the beaver in this way was not his alone: many others wrote about the beaver.<sup>5</sup> Digesting available information on the beaver and publishing in the Royal Society’s *Transactions* in 1733, C. Mortimer in “The Anatomy of a *Female Beaver*, and an Account of the *Castor* Found in her” cites sources as early as 1684.

Although substantively similar, sometimes evidently derived or even copied from Isham’s *Observations* or documents contributing to it, and certainly inspired by it, Graham’s *Observations* presents information under more visibly orderly categories. His entries for birds, fishes, mammals, and plants are longer and more comparative than Isham’s, and often refer to published research. For example, the sculpin (“Cowachemaycushshish, the Capelin”) is examined for scales; the local whitefish (“Tickomeg, the Guiniad”) is examined for “the lateral line,” said in *British Zoology* to “consist of distinct dusky spots,” and found to be lacking in the specimen examined (Graham, 1969, p. 122). Although we might take these differences as evidence of a genre perfecting itself or as instances approaching an ideal type, we might also take them as evidence of Graham’s experience of social interaction being slightly different from Isham’s. Whereas Isham enjoyed the company of Captain Middleton over at least two periods of contact—one when Middleton was master of the Company’s annual supply ship to York Fort, one when he wintered at 1741 as master of the Dobbs expedition—Graham worked for years closely with Thomas Hutchins, surgeon at York Fort and Chief Factor at Albany. Graham’s contacts with natural historians at home also seem to have been more regular or sustained: for example, he reports sending home salt for assay; presenting a beaver pelt to the Edinburgh Royal Society; having his identification of a fish ratified by the Royal Society. Wegg is said to have encouraged Andrew Graham to submit specimens directly to the Royal Society, and probably introduced him to Thomas Pennant, correspondent of Linnaeus and author of, among other volumes, *British Zoology* (1761-1766), *Arctic Zoology* (1784-1785), *The Genera of Birds* (1773) (Houston et al., 2003). Like Isham, Graham was “scantly educated” (Glover, 1969, p. xxvi), but ready for continuing education, learning names from *British Zoology* and other publications, and making his own *Observations* a nearly life-long project, continuing its preparation after his retirement to Scotland. Isham’s career as both writer and company man was briefer: he died in 1761, at York Fort.

Graham’s *Observations* in ten volumes, were deposited with the Company, the final volume, for which he received an honorarium of 10 guineas, arriving in 1793. We know these volumes today thanks to a 20th-century publishing event: in 1969, the Hudson’s Bay Record Society selected one volume of Graham’s *Observations* for editing and publication. Graham’s editors, Glover

and Williams, mention Isham as Graham's mentor and model. But Glover (1969) and Williams (1978) find the real story in their discovery that Thomas Hutchins got credit for natural-history observations which were actually, in their view, Graham's. Williams (1978) traces entries in manuscripts in Hutchins' own hand back to Graham, and also finds Pennant in his publication at first crediting Graham but then giving Hutchins full credit, and finds no attempt by Hutchins to correct the mis-attribution. By the time Hutchins had returned from the Bay to become Corresponding Secretary of the London Committee, his experiments with the freezing point of mercury had been published and praised by the Royal Society, and his status may have eclipsed Graham's simpler rank on his retirement from the Bay, as paymaster and purchasing agent for the Company in Scotland. Although Graham, long out-living the younger man, was evidently content with the published attributions, Glover and Williams are unforgiving in their exposé of Hutchins' plagiarism: his apparent representation of the Graham information to Pennant and others as his own, his circulation of the manuscripts in forms which did not identify Graham's authorship. The latest instalment in the controversy (Houston & Houston, 2003), however, interprets the evidence as collaboration rather than plagiarism: a blend of authorship, trader's experience and surgeon's technicality, a friendly cooperation. While these accounts take small notice of the substantive copying from Isham, they all show the role of social interaction, contacts in person and in print—institutional proximity—in shaping rhetorical motive. The Graham/Hutchins collaboration could be seen as an embodiment of articulated scenes—science and trade—each scene impinging on the other, for Graham the trader was coached in science and Hutchins the scientist was mentored in business, becoming a highly regarded trade manager. We have seen how the beaver information proliferated and replicated itself over this period, as each author conscientiously set out what could be known about this creature, rhetorically motivated by connected scenes of activity and interaction. Similarly, the information springing from the working relationship and companionable collegiality of Graham and Hutchins was taken up for circulation in the contiguous scenes of metropolitan science. In this interpretation—different from the plagiarism charge—scenes and situations motivate each writer to conscientious action. What looks nowadays like redundancy, if not plagiarism, was response to shared (but not identical) experience of exigence. These episodes of replicas may tell us that information is not simply the sending of knowledge from source to recipient but the expression of writers' quality of interest in the world, the terms on which they engage it, and the sociality of this engagement.



## CURIOUS GENTLEMEN AT HOME AND AWAY

Tracing the writing life of one ordinary man, James Isham, through articulated and contiguous scenes, a little farther, following these transfers and recursive influences—from Isham to Graham to Hutchins to Pennant—we are drawn into the orbit of another circle of sociality, for Pennant is the addressee of 44 of the 100 letters of White’s (1977/1788) famous *The Natural History of Selborne*, four of the total letters having been published in the Royal Society’s *Transactions*, and the composition of Selborne deriving from decades of note-taking. Like Isham, White sent specimens to London, although the distance was abbreviated:

This morning, in a basket, I packed a little earthen pot of wet moss, and in it some sticklebacks, male and female; some bull’s heads; but I could produce no minnows. This basket will be in Fleet-street by eight this evening; so I hope Mazel will have them fresh and fair tomorrow morning. I gave some directions, in a letter, to what particulars the engraver should be attentive. (White, 1977/1788, p. 52)

Just as Isham received specimens from Cree traders, White was also a recipient, getting “many boxes and packages of plants and birds” sent to him by his brother from Gibraltar (p. 236). As Isham was directed in his paragraphing by the London Committee, White makes entries in a purpose-published “Naturalist’s Journal.” White has a livelier preference than Isham for the standard, encouraging others to record their observations according to the template in the “Naturalist’s Journal”, and imagining others prompted to proper observation of insects if provided with “some neat plates that should well express the generic distinctions of insects according to Linnæus” (p. 85). But the standard is perhaps only one expression of a certain subjectivity, that of the “curious Gentleman,” who is in *Selborne* a frequent presence. Sometimes he is hypothetical, “If some curious gentleman would procure the head of a fallow-deer, and have it dissected, he would find ... ” (p. 42). Sometimes he is actual, “A gentleman curious in birds, wrote me word that his servant had shot one last January, in that severe weather, which he believed would puzzle me” (p. 37). The *curious* are distinguished from the *incurious*, who fail to appreciate, for example, the wonder of worms, and their part in the natural economy. In the scene of White’s writing, the curious gentleman is an attitude, a capacity to take an interest, and to communicate the product of that interest to a circle of

like-minded men. Even at a glance, *The Natural History of Selborne*, being letters, demonstrates the sociability of science, its substantiation in the personal exchange of information—recognition, “approbation” (p. 151), mutual regard, fraternity. While White recommends natural history for its contribution to the observer’s “health,” “cheerfulness,” and “happiness,” his ultimate recommendation of these practices is, in his own case, their leading him to “knowledge of a circle of gentlemen” and their “intelligent communication,” “a matter of singular satisfaction and improvement” (p. 4). From the circle of interaction—not only models of address, but response and reply—springs the rhetorical motive for lifelong observation. Far away, Isham had also “made itt [his] Buisness to gaine the Names of all the different sorts and Kinds” (Isham, 1949/1743, p. 119) and was also a “curious Gentleman,” a virtuous subject, identified by his writings and their address, his experience of exigence.

While the link from Isham on the shores of Hudson Bay to White in his Hampshire parish shows a subjectivity—a disciplined, sociable masculinity—frequenting scenes (home parish, foreign coasts) that become rhetorical situations, it also shows genre’s overdetermination, its articulation in multiple scenes of activity. In contrast to the charitably educated Isham, White was a fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. *Selborne* offers not only some of its author’s own verse, celebrating for example “THE GOD OF SEASONS” (White, 1977/1788, p. 213), but, much more prominently, his readings of Milton and the Bible, and of classical texts, especially Virgil and his mention of, for example, doves, frozen rivers, and the damaging effects of echoes on bees. Articulating with literary situations, White’s natural history circles away from the scenes and situations experienced by Isham. Equally, while Isham’s accounts of birds, berries, fishes, and temperatures answer commercial as well as scientific interest, White’s observations project the position of the curious gentleman and also the practical one in a rural parish, with recommendations, for example, for appropriate cultivation around ponds, using gunpowder to reduce the abundance of crickets, planting to protect bushes from the effects of cold or heat, using a thermometer to know when to protect stored fruits and vegetables from freeze, or, most quaintly, building an obelisk so one will not only ornament one’s grounds but also instruct oneself on the precise nature of the solstice. Articulating with rural husbandry, *The Natural History of Selborne* rotates, in its circle of interest, away from the horizon of interest of sub-arctic trade, even as it shares other scope with the trader-writers (like Graham and Hutchins, White watches thermometers [pp. 258, 261]; like Graham putting the cask of water out for testing, White uses an ear trumpet to test Virgil’s opinion on bees [p. 205]). The connection between Isham and White is not a mis-match, or a crude approximation on the one side, and an ideal prototype on the other, but a demonstration

of the multiple motivations of genre, genre’s participation in multiple scenes of activity (Isham: travel, trade, science; White: sedentariness, literary practice, parochial husbandry, science) and the writer’s motive springing from histories of interaction and career-path.<sup>6</sup>

## GENRE AS CONSCIENTIOUS ACTION

For Isham to take up his pen unbidden in the forlorn winter of 1742-1743 and to write as he did (or for Graham to labour over ten volumes), he was moved by a condition more impressive than “convention,” or even schooling. Rather, he was motivated by his experience of his position, his conscientious orientation to circumstances (the distance, the cold, the people approaching the fort, the beavers, the birds), roles in activities undertaken in the company of others. In turn, the position he takes is possible only by its rendering in language—wordings embedded in circumstance rather than free-standing convention or extant form, wordings infused with motive because they are attached to situation, social interaction being the way we learn language itself. When the situation expires—as Isham’s long ago has done, or Graham’s or Hutchins’—and the wordings survive, their motive drains away, and they may look “conventional”—apparently automatic form—and their replication can look like copying. Or their recurrence can look “obsessive,” or scheduled by empire.

Or enforced by authority—but even if there were an official dictate to compliance, a centralising edict, there is little evidence of it in any success, for only a few traders did the kind of writing we see in Isham’s *Observations*, or Graham’s: only a few felt themselves thus called upon. Yet in this scarcity or scattering of response—the precariousness of genre’s recurrence—is also genre’s robustness. An obscure lad, charitably educated and indentured to an outpost, estranged from the centre by class and distance, and then re-connected by the contact zone and the Northwest trade, Isham is nevertheless occupied by their themes—both invested by them and interested in them. This occupation is his rhetorical motive, his identity and identification as a “curious Gentleman.” In the career of James Isham, we do not see forces radiating from the centre to standardise expression, but a man at a distance, picking up intermittent signals locally and collegially, his translations of them (wordings, notes, specimens) then inserting themselves into the productions of the city. Isham’s descriptions are no match for Pennant’s or White’s, or even for Graham’s, which shows us not a failure of form but genre’s versatility, its sensitivity to situations in their multiple articulations. Genre is robust *because* it is versatile and versatile *because*

it is local, and *not* central and conventional—and also precarious because it is local: an opportunistic epidemiology rather than a standardisation, for who could have said who out there would become a “curious Gentleman”?

This brief rhetorical history suggests that what we today call professional—or technical or business—communication may not be so insular or chastely purposed as we sometimes think. Like documents from “the Bay,” it may articulate with other scenes, may have other, multiple involvements. It would be interesting to know these. And, while we may be tempted by images of global transfers of information to design formal regularities—as some CMC researchers are tempted—to focus on standardisation or “conventional” aspects of communication may be to neglect the overdetermination of rhetorical motive, and its sources in social interaction. Even the Linnaean standard was a matter of conscientious motive, or an intimation relayed over many points of local contact.

## NOTES

1. Some of the most impressive expressions of the question arise from the consortium of McGill/Carleton research in the 1990s, published as Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré, (1999), *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*, and Dias and Paré, eds., (2000), *Transitions: Writing in Academic and Workplace Settings*, but also presaged by Freedman’s (1994) bold statement of the issue.

2. A long article on Web design (Agre, 1998), with a serious account of genre theory, and the capacity of communities of language users to develop genres indigenously, at the same time implies that genres can be invented strategically and centrally—a possibility about which rhetorical theorists of genre might be sceptical.

3. Capt. Middleton made four voyages to Hudson’s Bay Company posts in the decade preceding Isham’s arrival at the Bay (1725, 1726, 1727, 1729) and made his last voyage to Hudson Bay for the HBC in 1737, five years into Isham’s employment by the Company (*Eighteenth-Century Naturalists of Hudson Bay*, Appendix A “Sailing Ships to York Factory, 1716-1827”). As master of the first Dobbs expedition—representing HBC rivals—he wintered at Churchill in 1741, during Isham’s first year as Factor there.

4. Some topics on which Isham corrected Ellis: local medicinal practice; abundance of copper (vouched for by Ellis, doubted by Isham); gender roles; cannibalism; complaints of aboriginal trade partners (which Isham doubts Ellis was in a position to hear, and if he did hear such, would not understand).

5. In the twentieth century, Harold Innis begins *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1962/1930) with a natural history of the beaver surprisingly like Isham's (or Graham's). In his deep scholarly engagement in the world of the fur trade, he picks up and replicates the sound of the natural history of the beaver. Innis follows his own description of the beaver by noting how many such descriptions there are in the writings of those involved in the fur trade (p. 3).

6. Literary rather than rhetorical reading of the connection between the Northwest and Selborne, between imperial expansion and parochial contraction, might pick up White's having heard from a friend about moose in the St. Lawrence ("the male moose, in rutting time, swims from island to island, in the lakes and rivers of North America, in pursuit of females. My friend, the chaplain, saw one killed in the water as it was on that errand in the river St Lawrence: it was a monstrous beast, he told me; but he did not take the dimensions" [p. 8]), or his having a "near neighbour, a young gentleman in the service of the East-India Company" (p. 247), or his notice that the eminent naturalist Scopoli is "physician to the wretches that work in the quick-silver mines" of Carniola (p. 123).

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