

# Thanadelthur

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Traditionally, the Western Canadian fur trade has been considered an all-male frontier. This is far from the truth. Indian women, with whom the traders extensively inter-married, played an important role. They not only assisted the traders in wilderness survival but actually helped to extend the trade. One of the most remarkable women to emerge in the history of the Hudson's Bay Co. was Thanadelthur, a young Chipewyan woman, who acted as guide, interpreter and peace negotiator for Governor Knight's expedition of 1715-16. This account of Thanadelthur is excerpted from Sylvia Van Kirk's new book, *Many Tender Ties* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980), which is a study of the role played by Indian, mixed-blood and white women in the development of the fur trade society in Western Canada.<sup>1</sup>

In the journals of York Factory<sup>2</sup>, Thanadelthur is always referred to as the Slave Woman. She, along with other of her countrywomen, had been captured by the Crees in a raid upon the Chipewyans in the spring of 1713. The Crees, being the first to obtain guns from the traders, had gained the ascendancy in this tribal conflict and so devastating had their attacks been that one branch of the Chipewyans came to be known as Slaves. According to Chipewyan oral tradition, the Slave Woman's real name was Thanadelthur which meant 'marten shake'. The explorer Samuel Hearne, an astute observer of Chipewyan society in the later 18th century, recorded that girls were usually named after some part or property of the marten.

Although inaccurate in specific detail, it is notable that the story of Thanadelthur as handed down by the Chipewyans emphasized her youth and attractiveness. If Chipewyan women, in general, failed to conform to the Englishman's ideal of beauty, Hearne conceded that many were of a 'most delicate make' and 'tolerable' when young. Owing to her difficult way of life, a girl's beauty was particularly fleeting. Given in marriage when very young, the care of a family added to her constant hard labour rendering even the best-looking woman old and wrinkled before she was 30. It is probable, therefore, that Thanadelthur was in her teens when captured by

the Crees. Strong, young women constituted a valuable prize in Indian warfare since female labour was of such importance in a nomadic society. Apart from being 'a handsome young woman', Thanadelthur possessed a forceful and intelligent character — a combination which captured the interest of the doughty old governor of York Factory, James Knight.

In the fall of 1714 when James Knight reclaimed the fort from the French under the Treaty of Utrecht, he was anxious not only to re-establish English trade but to extend it northward. The existence of the Chipewyans or Northern Indians was known, but their fear of the Crees prevented them from venturing to the Bayside. Knight's only contact with the Northern Indians was through his chance meeting with female captives held by the Crees. Thanadelthur was not the first 'Slave Woman' to seek refuge at York Factory. That fall another Chipewyan woman had escaped and made her way to the fort. The information she had given Knight about her country sealed his determination to establish a trade with the Chipewyans. This first woman sickened and died on November 22. Knight was lamenting his loss when two days later, Thanadelthur was brought in 'Allmost Starv'd'.

She had a harrowing tale to tell. Earlier in the fall when camped on the north side of the Nelson River, Thanadelthur with another of her countrywomen had escaped from their Cree master, hoping to make it back to their people before the winter set in. They had only the catch from their snares to subsist on and when cold and hunger finally drove them to turn back, the two women clung to the wild hope that they might find the traders whose wondrous goods they had seen in the Cree camps. Only Thanadelthur survived. Several days after her companion had perished, she stumbled across some tracks which led her to the tent of the Company's goose hunters at Ten Shilling Creek.

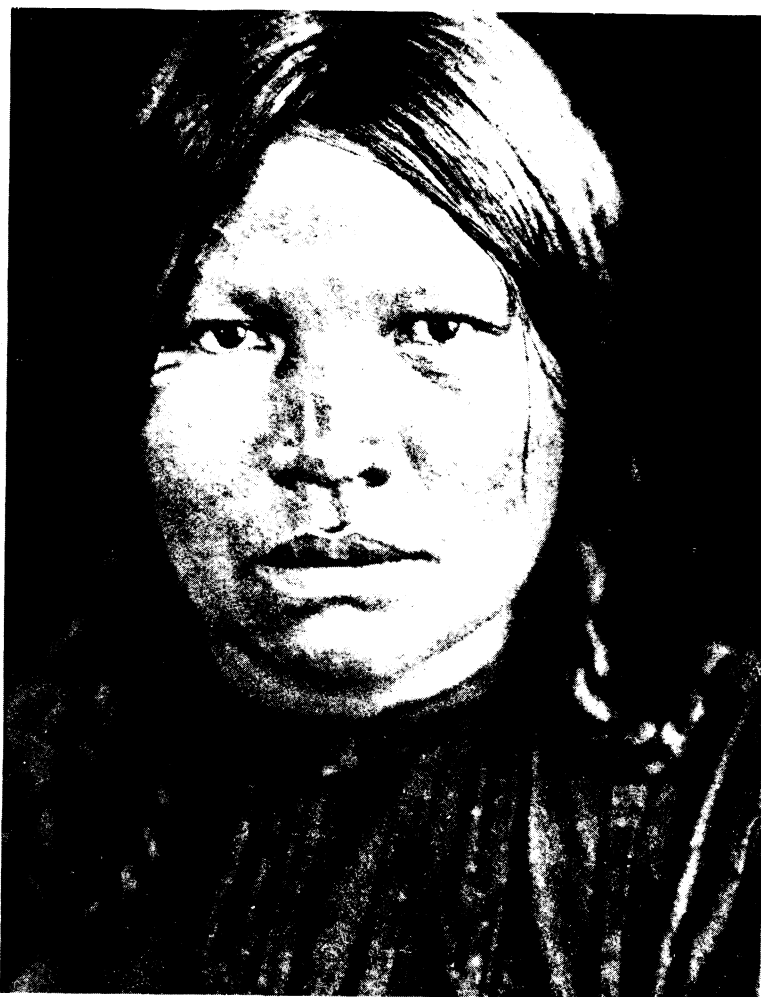
Knight was immediately impressed with his new informant who spoke encouragingly of her people and their rich fur resources. Even though her present knowledge of the Cree language was indifferent, she would be of 'great Service to me in my Intention' he wrote enthusiastically. To

ensure the success of his plans, Knight realized that he must first endeavour to establish peace between the Crees and the Chipewyans. Early in June 1715, the Governor gave a feast for his 'Home' Crees and persuaded them to send a peace delegation to their enemies. They were to be accompanied by one of the Company's servants, William Stuart, and the Slave Woman. Bands of 'Upland' Crees coming in to trade were also encouraged to join the peace mission, so that the party which set off on June 27 numbered about 150. Knight entrusted Thanadelthur, who was to act as interpreter, to the special protection of Stuart: he directed him to 'take care that none of the Indians abuse or Missuse the Slave Woman'. He gave the Chipewyan woman a quantity of presents to distribute among her people, instructing her to tell them that the English would build a fort on the Churchill River in the fall of 1716.

Thanadelthur, who readily appreciated the importance of her position, soon became the dominating spirit of the expedition. Stuart was amazed at the way she kept the Crees in awe of her and 'never Spared in telling them of their Cowardly way of Killing her Country Men.' Disaster stalked the enterprise, however. Slowed by sickness and threatened with starvation on the long trek across the Barren Grounds, the party had to break up to survive. Most of the bands turned back, leaving only Stuart, the Slave Woman, and the Cree captain with about a dozen of his followers determined to find the Chipewyans. Failure seemed certain when Stuart's party stumbled across the bodies of nine Northern Indians, slain by one of the other Cree bands. Fearing the revenge of the Chipewyans, the remaining Crees now wanted to abandon the search.

At this juncture Thanadelthur seized the initiative. She persuaded the Crees that if they would wait 10 days she would be able to find her people and return with them to make peace. She left the Crees to fortify their camp in case of attack and within a few days she came upon a large band of her countrymen. It required all her powers of persuasion to get them to return with her; she had to make herself hoarse 'with the perpetual talking' before the Chipewyans could be convinced of the pacific intent of their enemies. In true epic fashion on the tenth day, Thanadelthur and two emissaries came in sight of the Cree camp. When Stuart came out to meet them and conduct them to his tent, she signalled to the rest of the delegation, more than 100 strong, that it was safe to approach. According to oral tradition, Thanadelthur was placed on a raised platform, 'so that her people could see her and have confidence. When she beheld her people coming, she sang with joy'.

With the help of the Cree captain, Thanadelthur once again assured her people that their party bore no responsibility for the recent unfortunate raid upon the Chipewyans and that the Crees were most anxious for peace. With those who remained doubtful, this forceful diplomat had no patience:



*A young Chipewyan woman who would appear to have the Slave Woman's qualities of 'high spirit and firmest resolution'.  
From a photograph by Edward S. Curtis. c. 1900.*

**She made them all Stand in fear of her she  
Scolded at Some and pushing of others . . . and  
forced them to ye peace.**

William Stuart was full of admiration:

**Indeed She has a Divellish Spirit and I believe  
that if there were but 50 of her Country Men of  
the same Carriage and Resolution they would  
drive all the Northern, [Southern ] Indians in  
American out of there Country.**

Stuart's party arrived back at York Factory on May 7, 1716, accompanied by 10 Chipewyans one of whom appears to have been Thanadelthur's brother. The Englishman emphasized that the mission owed its success to his remarkable Chipewyan ally who had been 'the Chief promoter and Acter' of it.

Considering the status of women in Chipewyan society, how would it have been possible for Thanadelthur to attain such a prestigious position? In the eyes of the traders, Chipewyan women led a degraded existence. They served as beasts of burden and their misery, in an endless round of domestic drudgery, was intensified by the harshness of the northern environment.

'What is a woman good for . . . she is only to work and carry our things' a Chipewyan explained to David Thompson. Samuel Hearne observed women carrying up to 150 pounds in summer and hauling a much greater weight by sled in winter. He was shocked to discover that