Class Structure of the North West Company circa 1815

The North West Company was organized along class lines, making a distinction between labourers and gentlemen. The labourers carried out most of the physical work, while the gentlemen managed the affairs of the company In fur trade terms, the labourers paddled and portaged canoes, built and maintained trading posts, and produced items for the trade. The gentlemen were the fur traders and bookkeepers of the concern.

Also in fur trade terms, the labourers were called engagés, a term that makes reference to the contracts or "engagements" signed by all company engagé. The gentlemen were often called the bourgeois, the name given them by their mostly French Canadian engagés. The distinction between a gentleman and a labourer was based on money and education.

The ranks of the engagés in the NWC were filled mainly by farmer's sons and other uneducated men from around Montreal, where the company did its recruiting. Almost all of these men were French Canadian, or Canadien. The ranks of the bourgeois were filled by young educated men, mainly of Anglo-scottish background, either from the Canadas or from Britain. Many bourgeois actively recruited their young relatives into the trade, and so from the early days of the NWC its management had a uniquely Scottish character.

This was the general cast of the NWC structure, and exceptions should be noted. There were French Canadians that were bourgeois, and Anglo-scots that were engagé. And in amongst these engagés you might also find a smattering of expatriats from as far away as Germany or even the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). Also, by the second decade of nineteenth century, many métis sons of the bourgeois or engagés had followed in the footsteps of their fathers.

The North West Company's social structure reflects the hierarchical nature of European-Canadian society at the time. The elevation of certain classes allowed for an educated minority to effectively control the far more numerous labouring class. However, relations among company personnel were not as simple as the pyramid structure might represent. The bourgeois, though "higher-ranking", recognized the importance of earning the respect of their engagés. After all, bourgeois lives and profits were quite literally in engagé hands when traversing the country by canoe.

Of course, the ranks of company personnel make up only a part of a larger fur trade society that included the Native people, as well as the legacy that their contact with Europeans left behind: mixed-blood families. Beyond the pyramid representing company personnel there were the men, women, and children whose lives and experiences show an important outcome of Native-European contact.