



Peter Rindisbacher

Red River Colonist and Noted Artist
1821-26 Artworks



Fishing on the ice at the forks of the Assiniboine and Red rivers by Peter Rindisbacher, winter 1822.

Peter Rindisbacher

1806-1834

In 1821, a party of Swiss immigrants, hired by one of Selkirk's agents, was making its way from Emmenthal, Switzerland to York Factory and from thence to the Red River Colony. Among this group was a young man who would become the first Manitoba resident to set down a pictorial record of Indian life and the life of the struggling settlement. Peter Rindisbacher was born on April 12, 1806 in the Canton Berne, Switzerland and was a fifteen-year-old youth at the time of the journey. He sketched ceaselessly from the day his grand adventure to the New World began.

Rindisbacher observed the Indian life and settlement customs first hand, but unlike many other artists of the early west, he did not venture into the wilderness to observe and paint native ways. Rather he chose to remain ensconced in his outpost of white civilization. Nevertheless, he was the first to provide a detailed record of the native people who lived around the Red River, although he is not yet widely known in Canada, nor are his talents recognized in his native Switzerland. However, this obscurity may be largely due to the fact that he spent the major portion of his time among pioneer societies, which were predominantly occupied with extending and securing civilization in the Red River and Upper Mississippi River Valleys.

The Rindisbacher family departed York Factory on September 6, 1821, leaving a second group with the English clergyman, John West, to follow later. Rindisbacher's sketches of the trip form a unique documentary, as the only series of illustrations which show what it was like to travel the much used Canadian fur route, from Hudson Bay to Red River, during that period.

His drawings, some completed at the scene, and others, watercolour copies that he executed at a later date, include views of York boats on the Nelson and Hayes rivers, and Lake Winnipeg, the ordeals of portaging, and important depictions of the Hudson's Bay Company inland posts such as Rock Fort, Fort Logan and Oxford House on the river and Norway House on Lake Winnipeg.

The journey south was filled with hardships, and by November 1, 1821, when the group reached the mouth of the Red River and the southern end of the lake, one man had drowned and six children had died. The Swiss colonists as a group were not prepared for the struggle for survival which assailed them, but whether they had been deliberately misled is not known. The five years that

Rindisbacher spent in the settlement were a procession of calamities climaxed by the flood of 1826 which swept away most of the settlement.

Rindisbacher's record of life at Red River began one month after his arrival when he drew a scene depicting natives and settlers ice fishing on the river below Fort Gibraltar. The young man soon obtained a job for himself as a clerk with the Hudson's Bay Company, and although the salary was modest, it did allow him time to paint and draw, and to become acquainted with the Indian way of life. The Indians often camped in considerable numbers close to the settlement and among them he found many friends.

Rindisbacher apparently drew one of his Indian friends repeatedly, and placed himself in scenes inside an Indian tent, and in a picture celebrating the occasion of a gun salute in honor of the Governor of Fort Douglas. Nevertheless, he drew principally on the colourful Indian life around him, and placed on paper the full flavor of the Red River Colony, with the Métis and British traders around the post, and the Scots and Swiss settlers. Details of his sketches are so complete, that today, historians and students of Indian life and of the Red River Colony and trade center, scrutinize them carefully for what they reveal. In his works, for example, may be observed the exact dress and ornamentation worn by the different tribesmen and half-bloods; the kind of trade goods bartered to the Indians; the ways in which dogs were used; the methods of hunting; and travelling in the area at different times of the year; the household arrangements within the tipis; the customs, dress and equipment of the traders and settlers; and the principal look of the Colony itself.

Rindisbacher apparently made many of his first sketches with pencil and pen, and then he copied them again and again in watercolour. He had an aversion to oil, calling oil painting – "smearing". His drawings soon gained him a measure of success within the colony, and the settlers and the fur traders began to commission work from him, although at first, he probably gave away copies, such as the set given to John West on his return to England in 1823.

In 1824, during the term of Governor Robert Parker Pelly, Rindisbacher was able to establish prices for his pictures, and correspondence from George Barnston to James Hargrave, accountant at Fort Garry, indicated that Rindisbacher had established a small business in the manufacture of copies of his originals. In his correspondence of November 14, 1824, Barnston requested:

The Plain Indian on Horseback shooting at an enemy – the Group of Indians where the scalp is introduced. Captain Bulger's Pulaver – the death of the buffalo and one or two other Buffalo Pieces in which I think

the lad excels ... of all of these I have seen several different copies, so that I conclude he keeps one copy to take from another as occasion may require - A subject at which I have not as yet seen any attempt of his, and which I should like much to have is – Assiniboines stealing Horses – perhaps you might propose it to him. If care were taken upon it, I would willingly double the usual price – you may go to the length of £6 – in making purchases of this kind for me, but I beg you may be as liberal if not more so, than what others have been ...

Later, Barnston suggested that 'Rindispacher' be allowed to put his own price on his work as long as the account remained below £15.

Later, in 1826, a letter from Hargrave to Henry Boulton, a former Company officer at York Factory, showed that the accountant had entrusted Chief Trader Brown with a £10 account for a quantity of drawings "from the Swiss Lad at Red River". Unfortunately Hargrave also had to pass along the information that:

The young lad together with his father and the whole of the family has left the River for the United States so that these which you received are the last by that young artist which will be procured in this country.

In 1826, the disaster that drove Rindisbacher's family to seek a more hospitable environment further south, struck the settlement. Severe snowstorms had characterized the winter, and the heavy spring rains combined to flood the Red River Valley, washing away homes and fields. After five years of backbreaking toil, many of the settlers had had enough, including the Rindisbacher family, who left the colony to settle near Henry Gratiot's lead-mining and smelting works in south western Wisconsin.

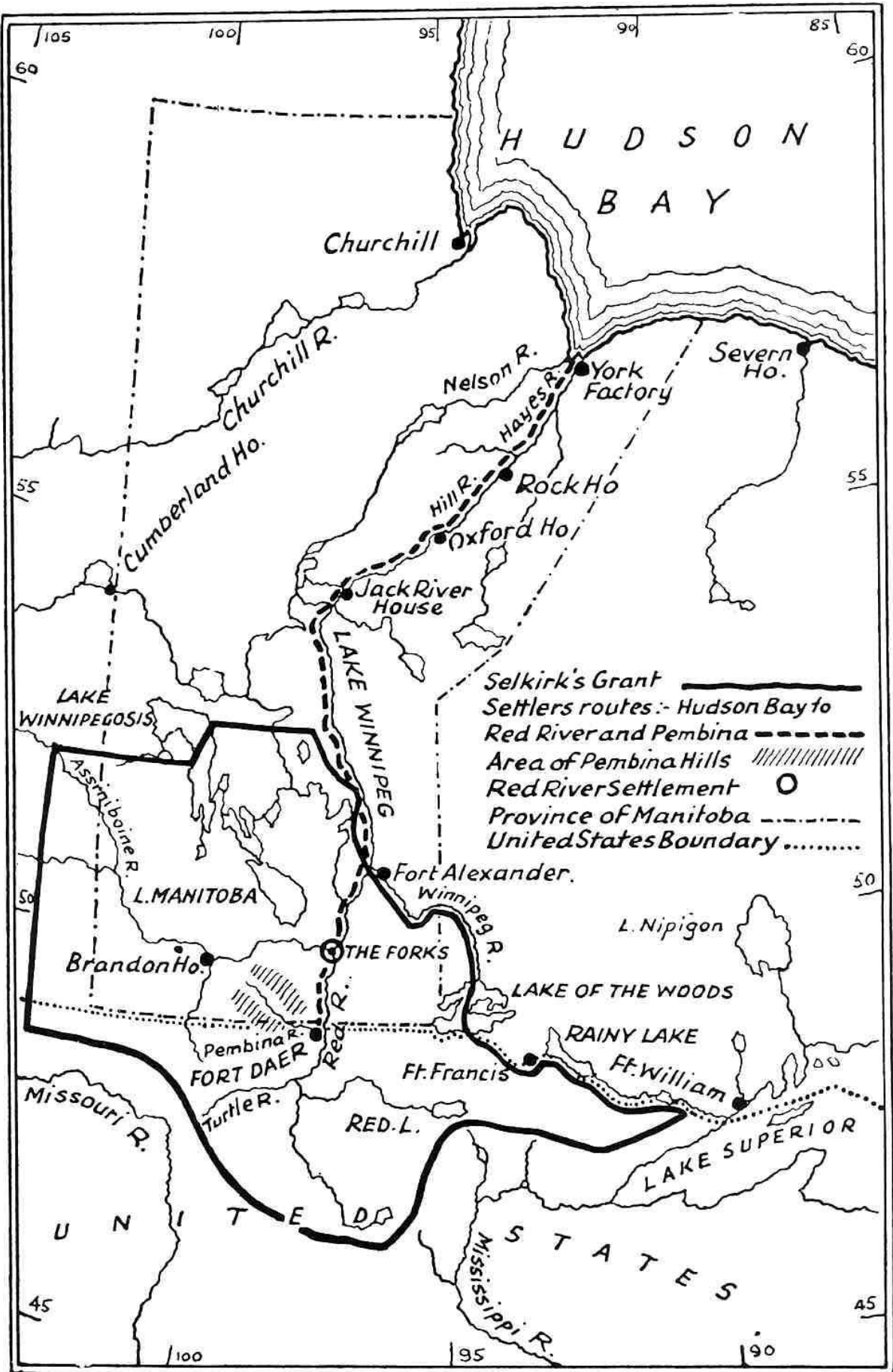
Young Peter lived there for three years and continued painting native peoples. In 1829, he sold several paintings, including one of the Sauk and Fox Chief Keokuk, to Caleb Atwater, a United States Commissioner, who visited in Prairie du Chien on government business. Atwater may well have been responsible for introducing Rindisbacher's talents to the eastern United States. In 1829, the year Rindisbacher moved to St. Louis, a lithograph of the Sioux Warrior, Charing, appeared in the American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine. The instant popularity of the print encouraged the journal to use his drawings in nine issues. Yet at the peak of his success, and much to the regret of his admirers, Rindisbacher fell suddenly ill and dies on August 13, 1834. It is thought that he had contracted cholera, however, a granddaughter stated in a letter to Grace Lee Nute:

I will add that I heard my Grandmother Monnier, his sister, say more than once, for she grieved long over her brother Peter's early death, that he probably died of poison from a habit of touching his brush with his tongue, yet the family had a vague suspicion that his wife, jealous of his devotion to his art, had administered poison.

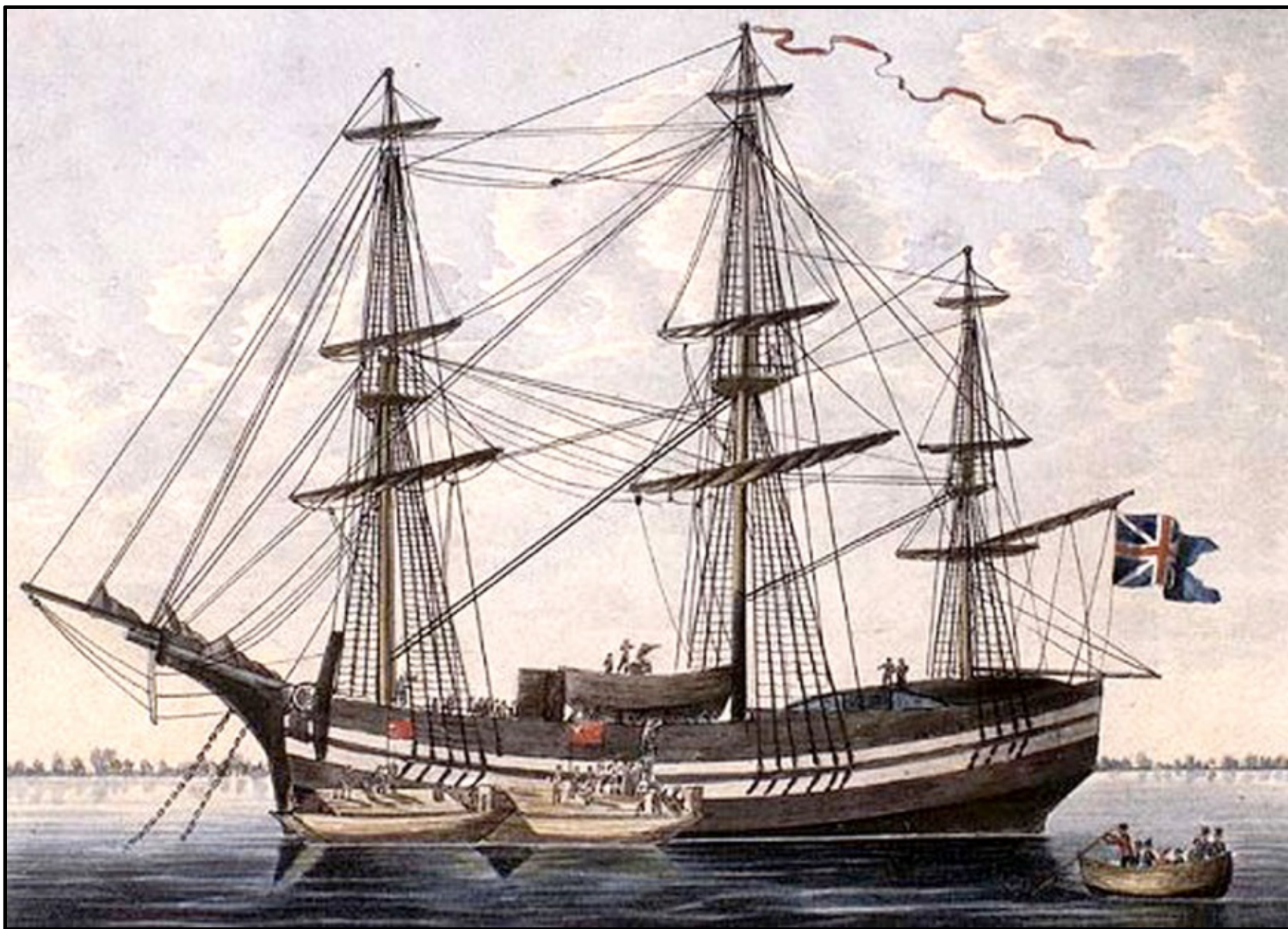
This commentary on Rindisbacher's work, in a letter signed "R" dated St. Louis December 7, published by the St. Louis Beacon, is a fitting close to a short career:

Mr. Rindisbacher has marked out a new track and almost invented a new style, of painting – one, too, of much interest. His sketches of groups or single Indians, are deserving of the highest admiration. The proportions and development of muscle, in his delineation of the human figure, are extremely correct. There is a living and moving effect in the swell and contraction he gives to the muscular appearance of his figures, that evinces much observation, judgement and skill. Talent, I might almost say genius, but his, deserves encouragement, and, undoubtedly were he in a position of more fashion and leisure he would receive it.

The above description of Peter Rindisbacher's life and works is an edited excerpt from "150 Years of Art in Manitoba", exhibition handbook published in conjunction with the Winnipeg Art Gallery's Exhibition for the Manitoba Centennial 1970, entitled "Struggle for a Visual Civilization" under Director Ferdinand Eckhardt.



Above: Map showing the land grant to Lord Selkirk and the route travelled by the early settlers from Hudson Bay to Red River and Fort Daer.



“Departure from Dordrecht under Captain James Falbister, May 30, 1821. The English colonist transport ship Wellington of 415 tons.”



"Discovery of the first ice in the neighbourhood of Greenland, June 26, 1821."



"The colonists are on the ice within sight of a mass of ice of 5700 metres, June 30, 1821."



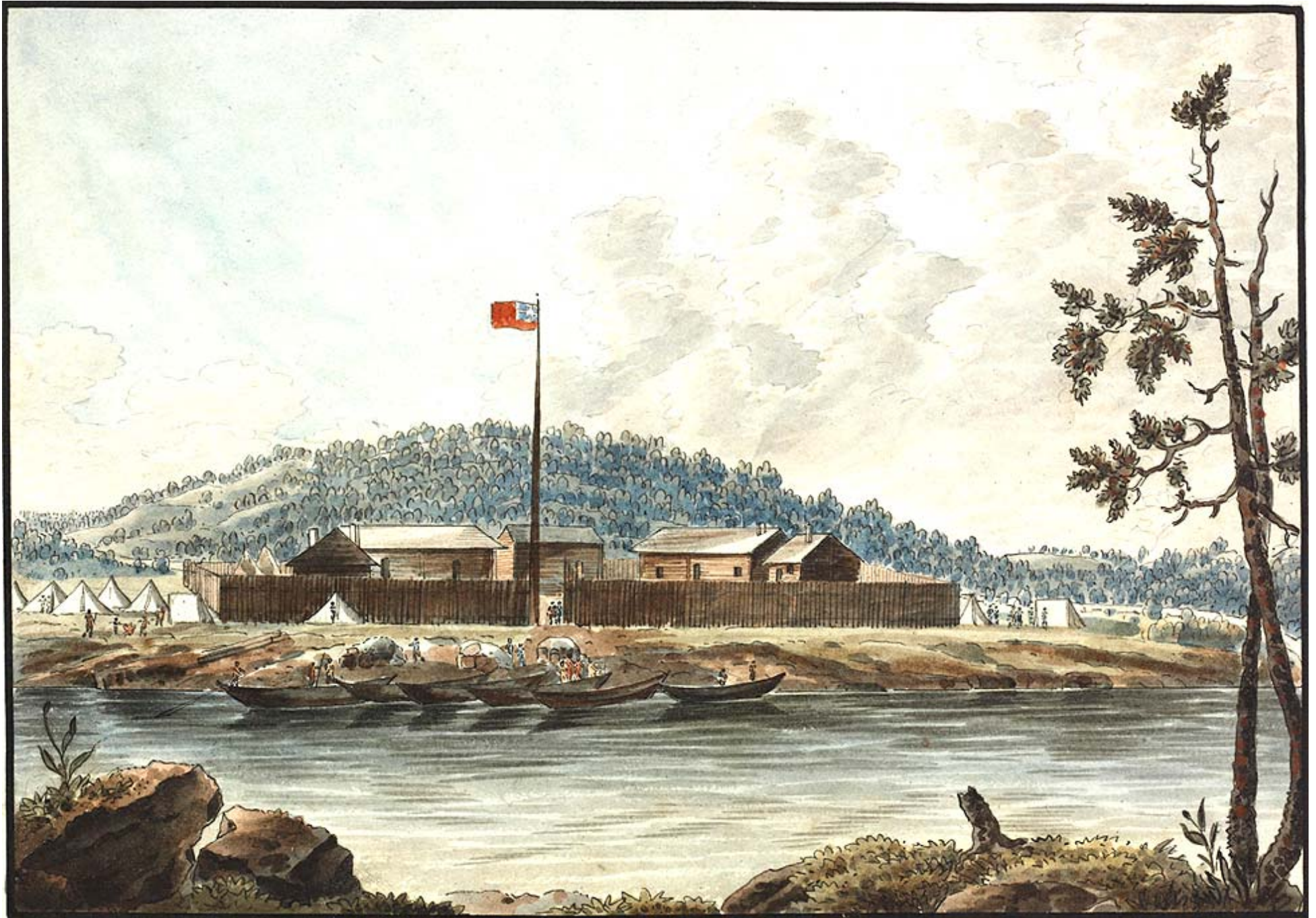
"The Wellington at anchorage after arrival at York Factory, Hudson Bay, August 17, 1821, after a voyage of 79 days."



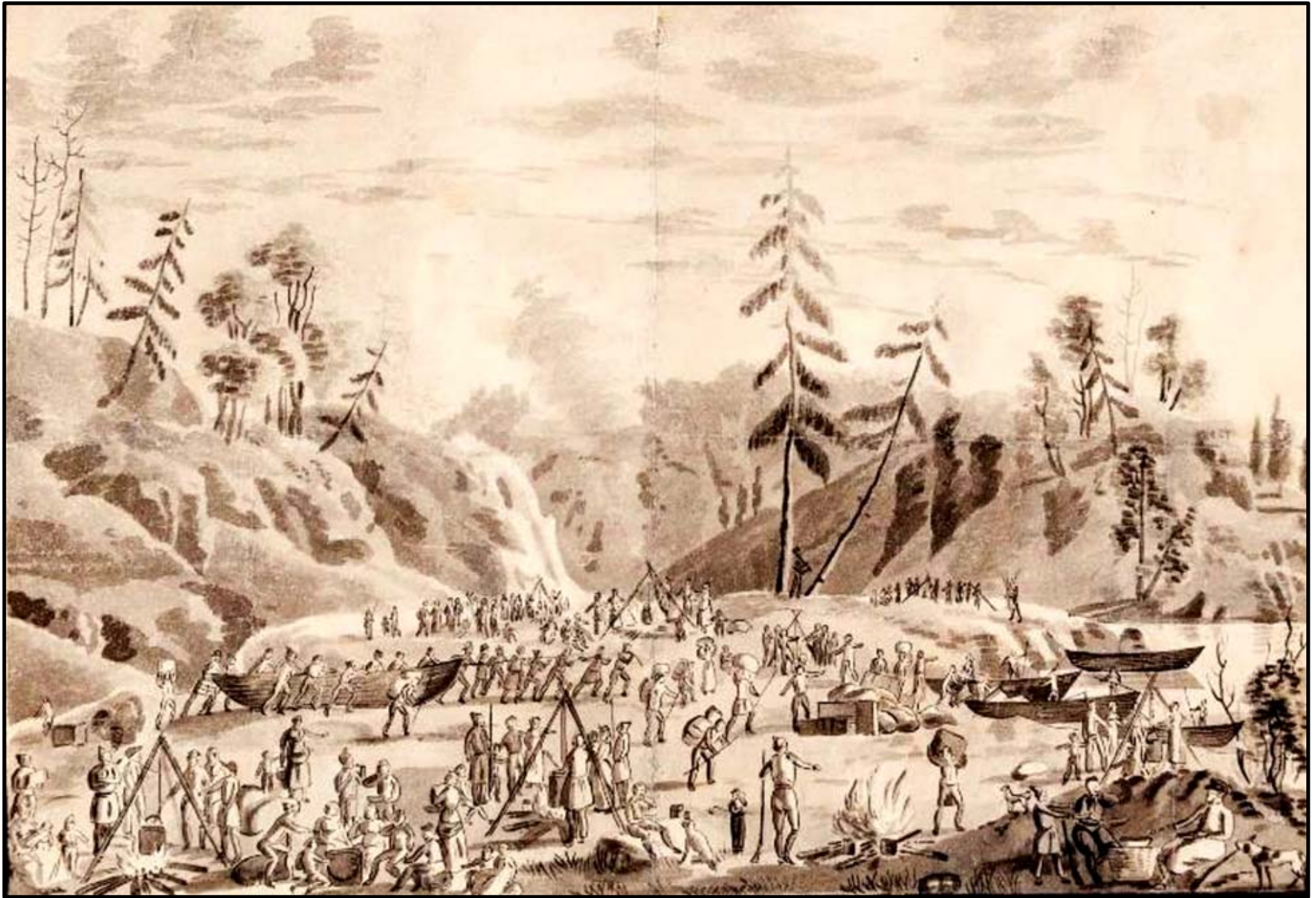
“Departure of the second colonist transport from York Factory to Rock Depot, September 6, 1821.”



“Difficult voyage up the Hay’s River to Rock Fort, September 1821.”



"Arrival and Stay at Rock Depot, September 21, 1821."



“Passing the Painted Stone Carrying Place, with the Swiss Colonists for the Red River Settlement, October 1821.”



"Arriving at Oxford House October 5, 1821."



“Portage near Norway House 1821. Extremely wearisome journeys at the portages.”



“Arrival at Norway House on the great Winipesi Lake [Lake Winnipeg], October 14, and departure thence, October 16, 1821.”



"Shipwreck and halt on Winipesi Lake [Lake Winnipeg], October 23, 1821."



“Cold night camp on the inhospitable shores of Lake Winipesi [Winnipeg] in October 1821.”



“Taking shelter at Poplar Point on the shores of Lake Winipesi [Winnipeg] in October 1821.”



“Arrival at the mouth of the Red River, and welcome from the Saulteaux Indians, November 1, 1821, after a river and sea voyage of 4836 miles.”



“Summer view in the environs of the Company Fort Douglas on the Red River. Summer 1822.”



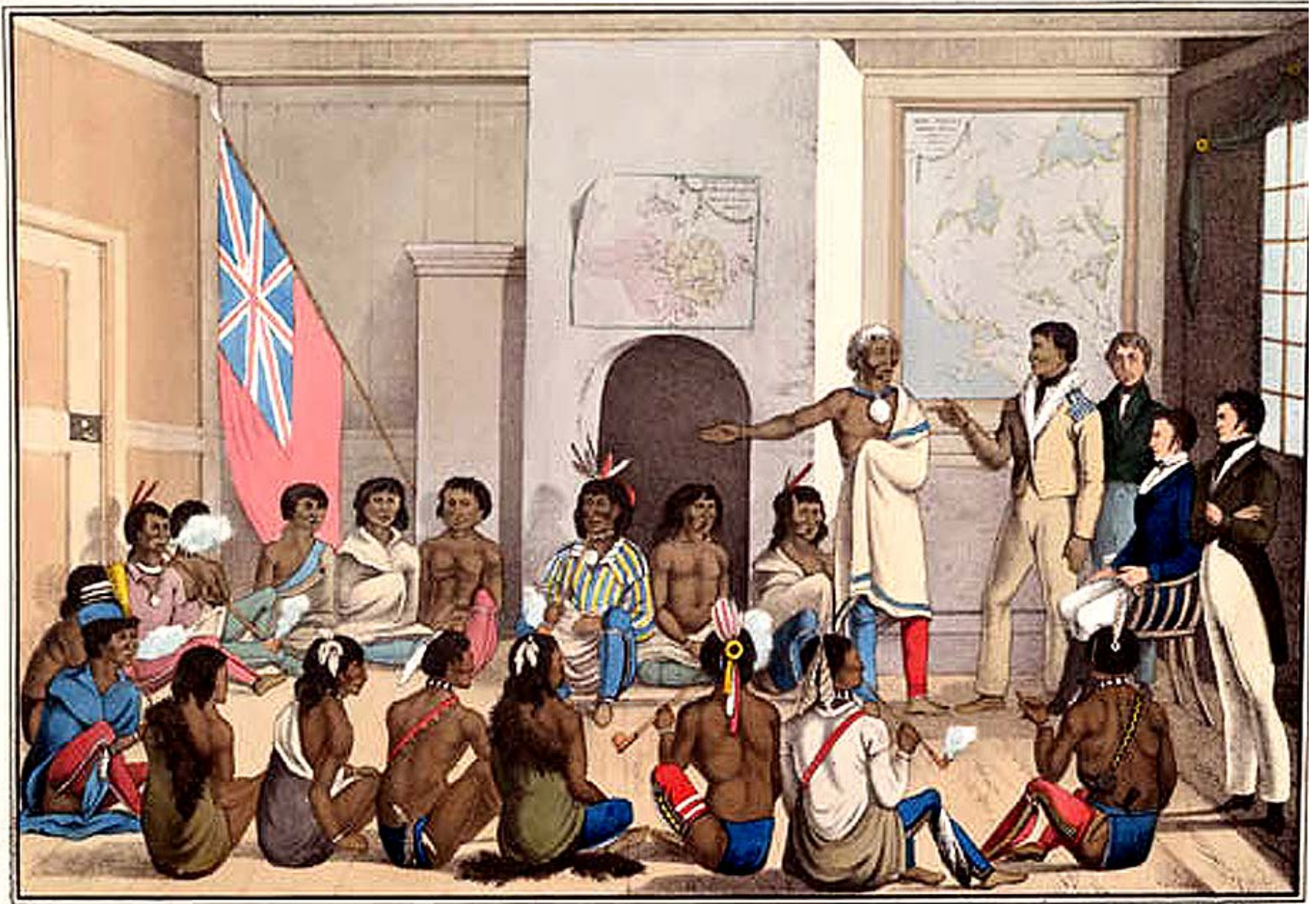
“Winter fishing on ice of Assynoibain [Assiniboine] & Red River. 1821.”



“The Governor of Red River Driving his Family on the River in a Horse Cariole.” Circa 1822.”



The Red Lake Chief and warriors meet with the Governor of Red River.



The Red Lake Chief making a speech to the Governor of Red River at Fort Douglas. May 22, 1823.



“Reverend John West’s home, Red River Settlement, watercolour, 1823.”



Fort Daer and North West Company trading post at Pembina, May 25, 1822.



Swiss, Scottish and Métis colonists at Red River Settlement. 1822



"Buffalo hunting in winter. 1822."



"Buffalo Hunting in the summer. 1822."



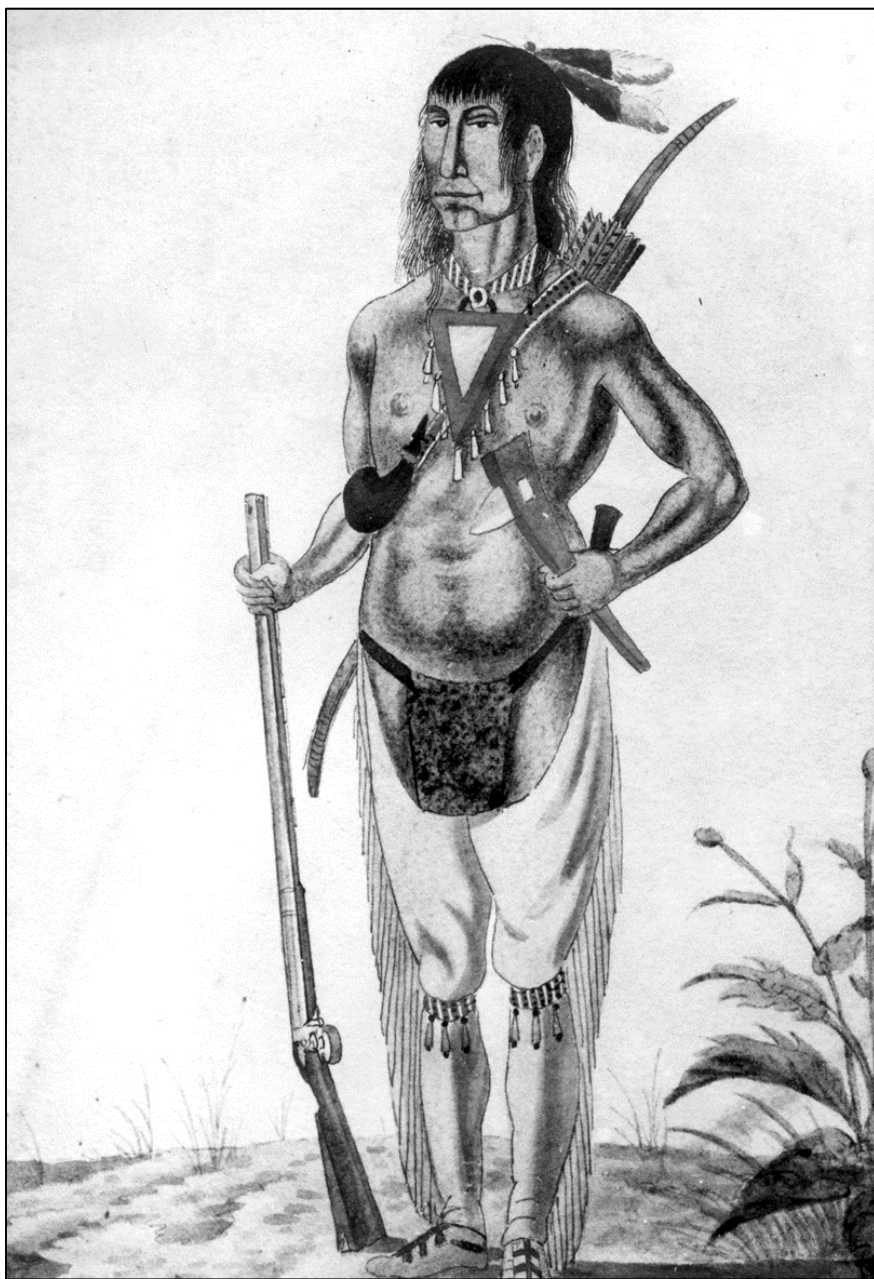
“A Métis man and his two wives.”



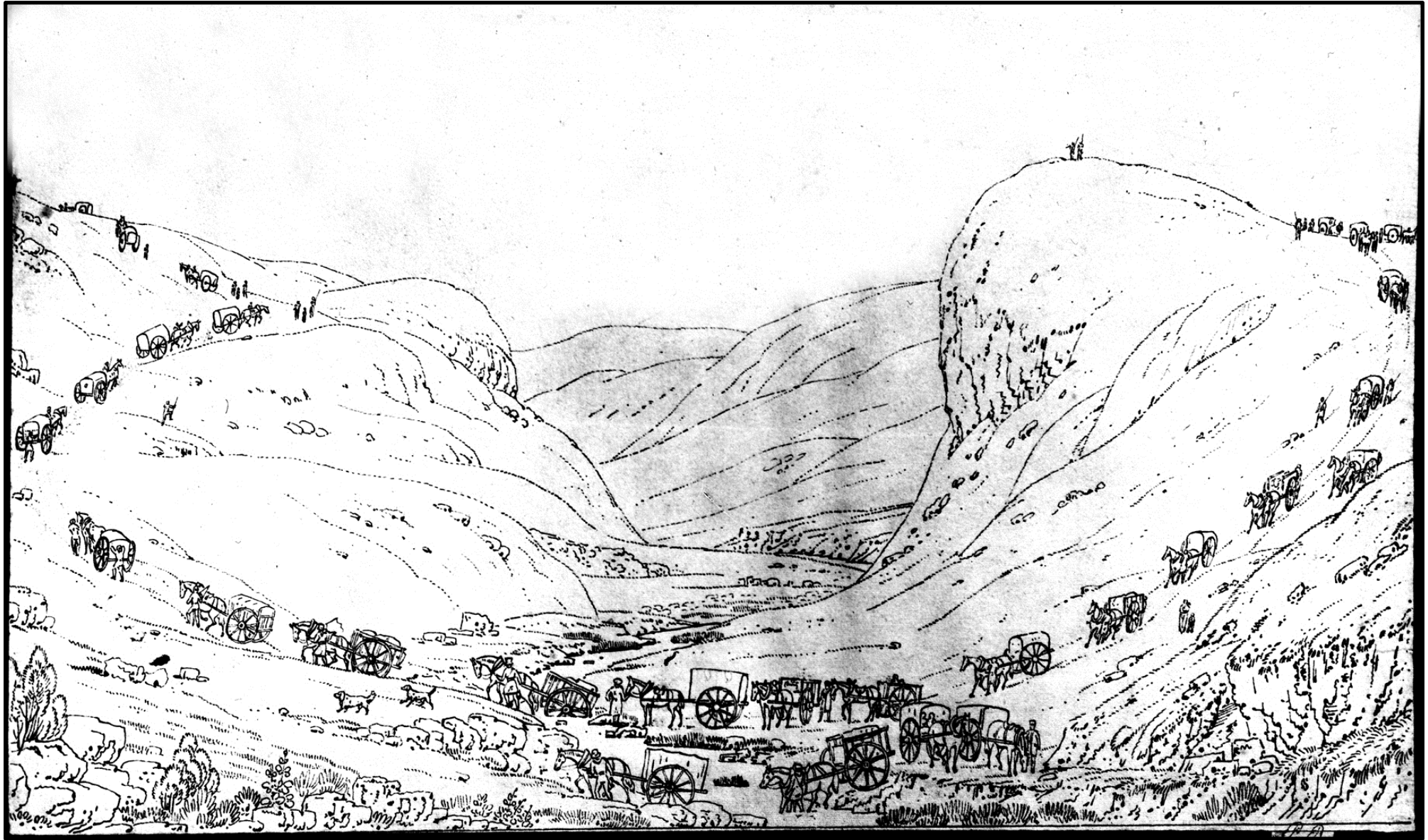
Métis family.



“A family of the Salteaux tribe on the Red River.”



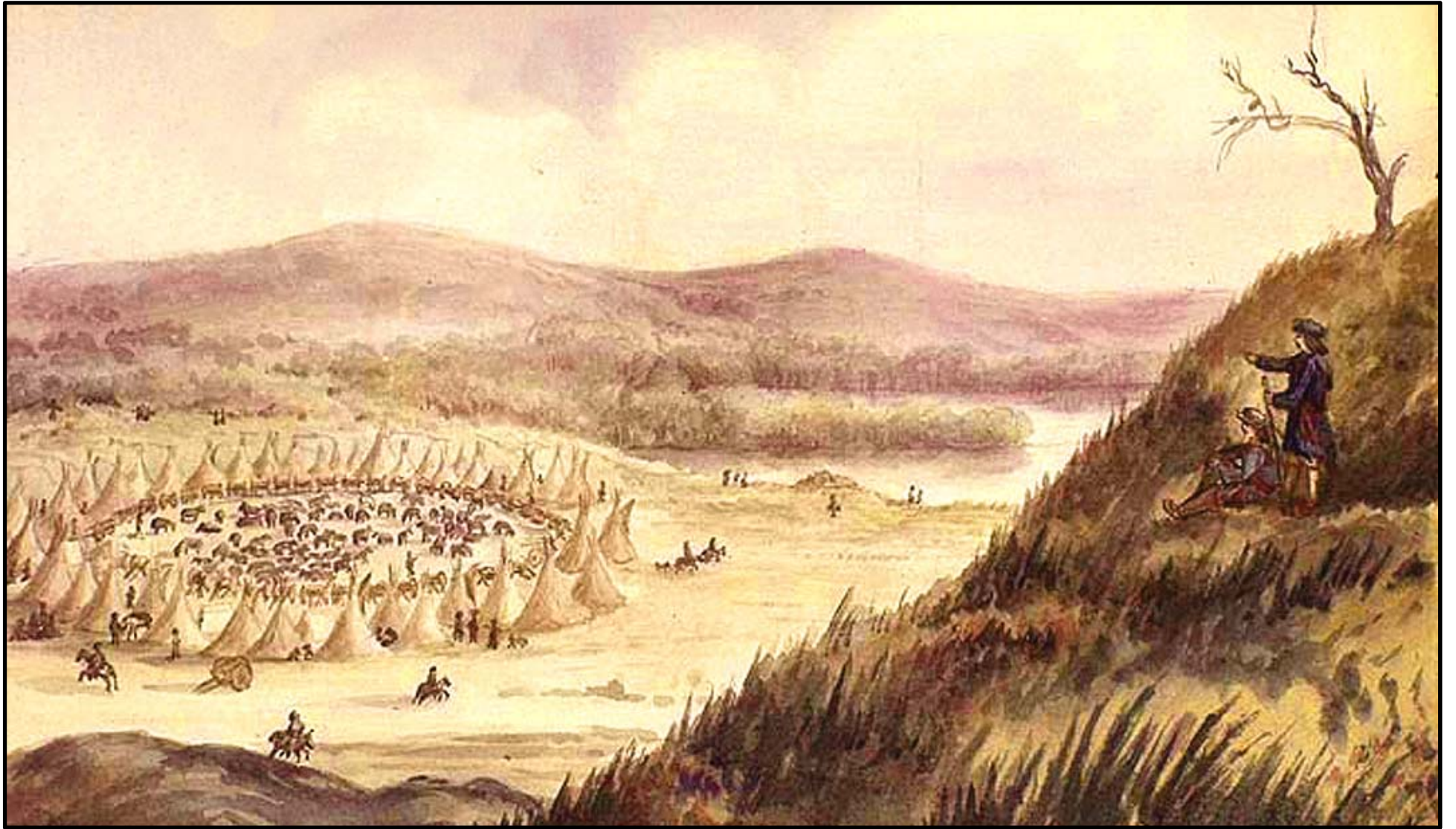
Chief Peguis.



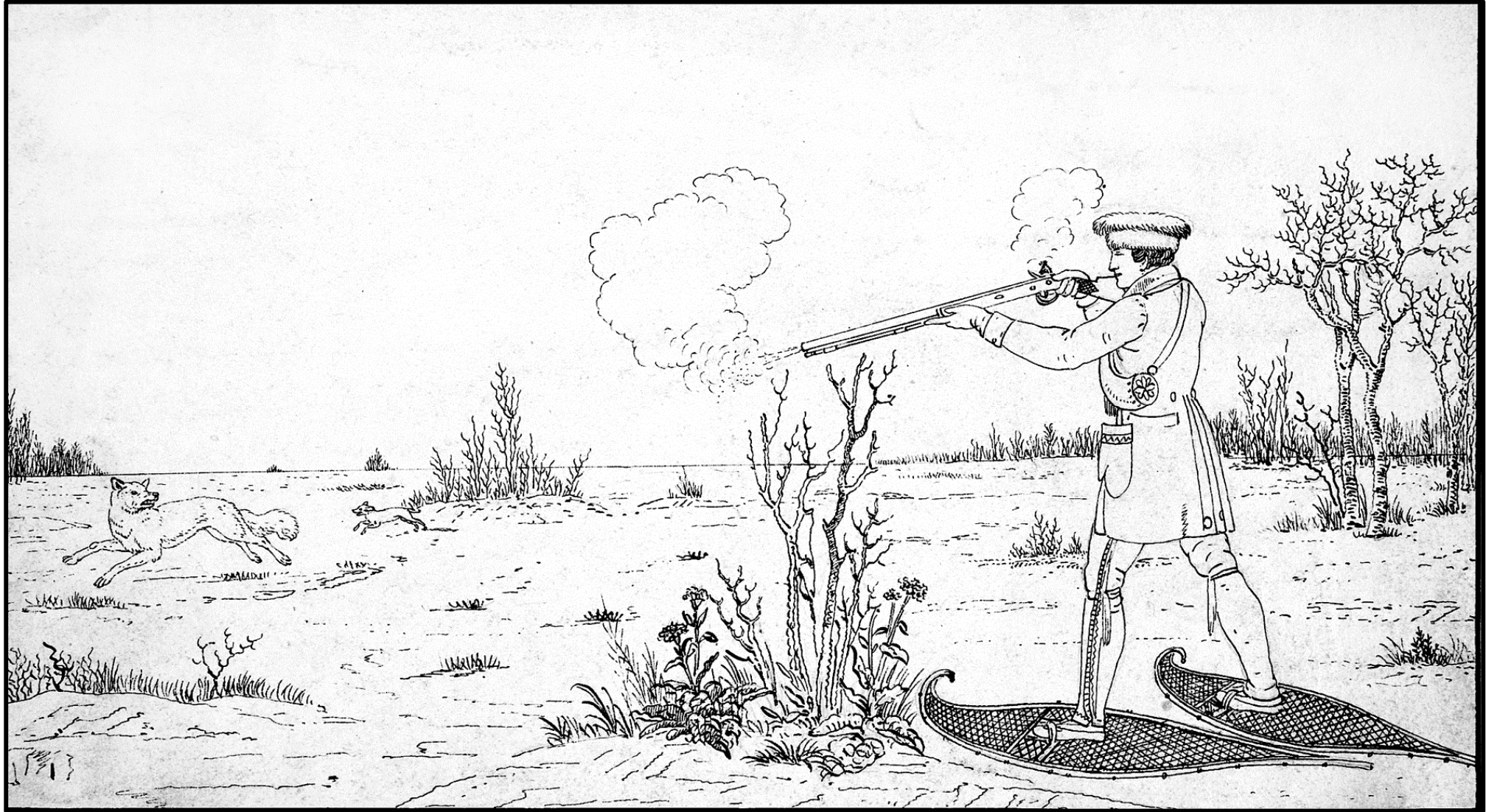
Hunters caravan crossing a ravine. Sketch.



Red River Carts Fording a River.



Buffalo Hunters' Camp.



"Shooting at wolves on the prairie."



Buffalo hunting using horses and muskets in early spring. 1822

Peter Rindisbacher.



Buffalo hunting in early spring when they have difficulty running through the melting snow. 1822



"A Souteaux Indian, Travelling with his Family in Winter near Lake Winnipeg." Watercolour, 1823.



"Saulteaux standing in a winter landscape." 1822.



“Canadian Prairie Indians on Snowshoes.” Circa 1923.



“The dogs discover a herd of buffalo.”



"A dog cariole only used in winter."



Tent Interior .



“Smoking pipes inside a tent.”



"The Chase".



“Introducing the scalp.”



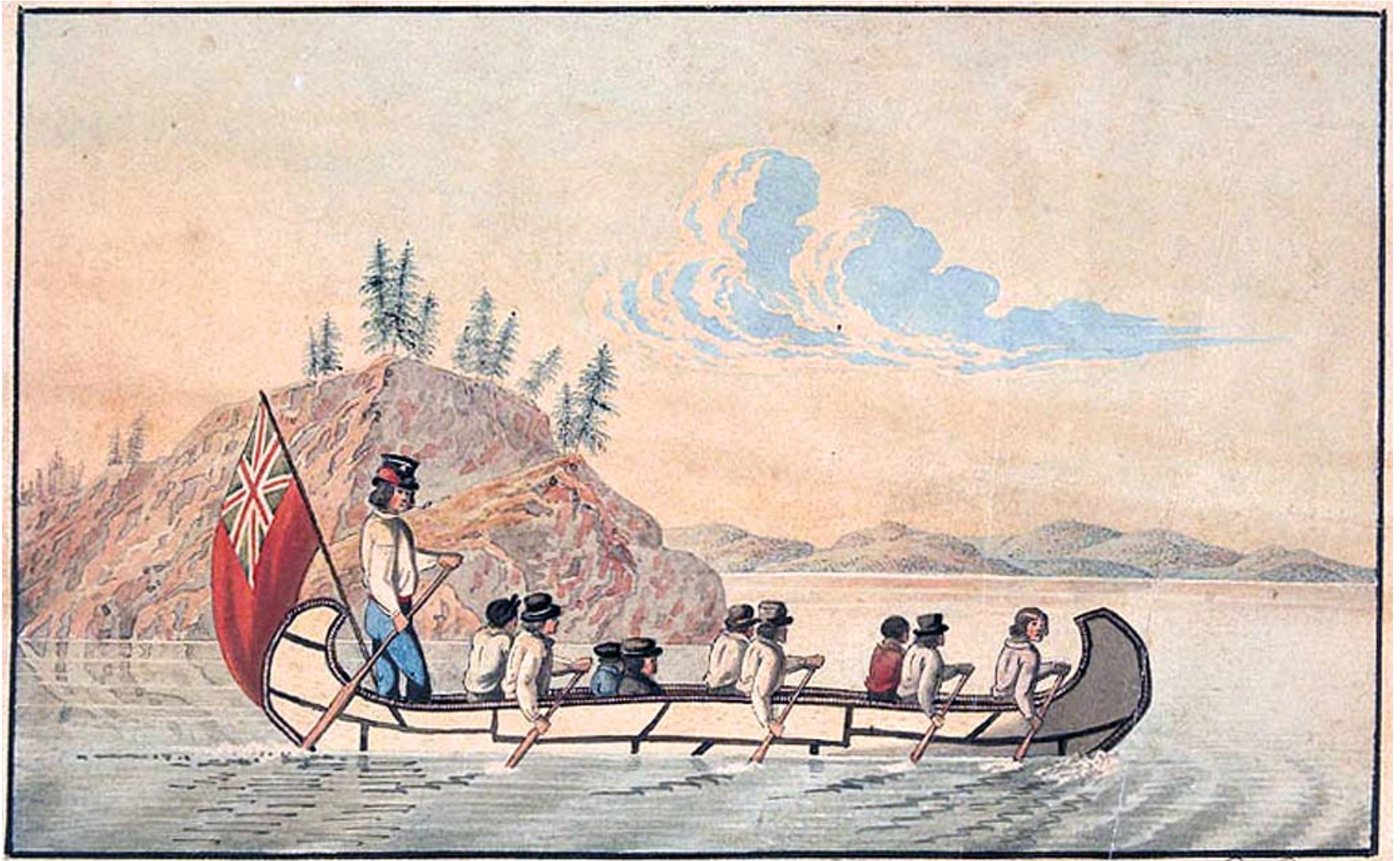
"Men returning from war."



Buffalo bull.



Sauteaux family in canoe.



“Hudson's Bay Company officials in an express canoe crossing a lake. 1825.”



The Great Red River Flood of 1826.

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