CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHURCH AND JUST PRICE

In New France, the town market framed much of the earliest Indian trading. Samuel de Champlain’s more westerly marketplace situated at Lachine was formerly moved to Montreal, farther from raids by the colony’s enemies – the Iroquoian-speaking Five Nations, and closer to albeit threadbare colonial French authority. It moved, quite literally, within the walls of the town and its protection. At Montreal, the Indian market, however, continued to raise all sorts of conundrums. For more than a century, the Indian fairs, appointed at strict times, united Indian sellers together with the stall keepers and cabane owners of the colony. Stalls and shops lined Montreal’s market square, itself set alongside the river below Hôtel Dieu. It functionally shielded all parties from Five Nations reprisals, at least while trading, and monopolized revenues for the Company of 100 Associates, and after the trade’s purchase by locals, the Habitants’ communauté. This monopolization was all the more important given the chronic indebtedness of the shaky, financial entity that constituted New France before its royal provincehood was granted in 1663.

These trading fairs became focal points in the colony’s negotiated entry into nearby Indian territories. About 800 Indian visitors arrived to the market in 1674; about 500 by 1690. Yearly, at appointed times, the market accommodated flotillas of Huron, Algonkin and far western tribes. The fair even survived the explosion of trade inland after the 1680s and was still quite in place by the time of the massive 1701 Montreal Peace, in which some 1300 Indians arrived from some 44 Indian nations to join a pact of neutrality and peace with New France and the Iroquois. Given the overlap of politics and trade among Indians, it was a matter of course that the diplomatic talks leading up to the treaty began conspicuously with a day of trading, when the great heavy town gates were opened to the market square at a given hour early in the morning, and Indians as far as the Mississippi, present-day Nova Scotia, New York and the petit nord of present-day Ontario streamed through the streets to enter into shops, haggle with their owners, and return with strouts, powder, wigs, and finery: “they purchased powder, balls, hats, clothing in the French style trimmed with fake gold lace, which gave them a very grotesque appearance, vermilion,
kettles, iron and copper pots, and all sorts of hardware," a witness wrote.¹ Many of the prominent diplomats speaking at the peace talks in fact wore the very clothing and wigs that they had purchased from stall owners a few days previously. French soldiers patrolled to be sure that the event, so important to the colony’s diplomatic fortunes, was a dry and peaceable one. For those unaccustomed to such a large market it was a spectacle all the same: “The town during that time resembled an inferno, because of the frightful appearance of all the Savages who strutted about prouder than ever, ... The shouting, the din, the quarrels and discord, that occurred,... added to the horror of these spectacles.”²

The governor annually made the journey to the town in time for the market’s official opening, in order to give gifts and reinforce political relations with nations taking part. The colony itself, with the royal province established in 1663, and the transplantation to Quebec of the Intendent’s office, soon scrutinized the Indian trade in more detail and fully regulated the commerce between France’s merchants and Indian allies. The Intendant’s retinue of accountants inspected merchant books regularly, stamped goods arriving at port according to quantity and price; the sovereign council passed numerous ordinances stopping habitants from trading (often foodstuffs, but, especially eau-de-vie) with Indians in the environs; those running the cabanes were outlawed from selling to Indians, and merchants were forbidden from hoarding goods until they were in short supply, or caching them in the woods, to trade them on the sly to Indians outside of the regulated town fair. In addition, when a commis was sent to gather furs at the site of the chase, he was allowed to take only certain amounts at set prices, so as to not ruin the trade in town or to stop Indians from paying debts they had taken from town merchants.³

³ See, for instance, “Affiché par le vasseur huissier le 20e juillet” 1664, Vol. I edits Conseil souverain; on the restrictions from going in the environs of the chase at Trois-Rivières, see Vol. II, edits, 26 April 1677, pp. 123–125. On the restriction on single men from leaving their farms and habitations over a period of 24 hours during the period of the trade, see Vol. I, 4 September 1673, p. 766; on restrictions against foreign merchants from trading in their shops and boutiques to the detriment of the habitants, see Affiché aux Trois Rivières,