



The 'Many Shots' Robe

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Museum artifacts can speak volumes about their cultures of origin. Too often, however, the chain of events linking an artifact, its maker/owner, the person who collected it and the museum which owns it is too fragmentary to reconstruct an object's history. This is fortunately not the case with the robe in the Pitt Rivers Museum bearing the painted war deeds of Many Shots. This painting and its history tell us a great deal about the Kainai people.

The Kainai, or Bloods, are a division of the Blackfoot, traditionally a nomadic buffalo hunting people of the northwestern plains of North America in present day Montana and Alberta. When there was intense warfare among northern plains tribes, during much of the nineteenth century, men would gain social prestige through their war deeds. Pictographic painted records were an important means of ensuring that the public did not lose sight of a warrior's prowess. Such records were thus executed on highly visible surfaces, such as tipi covers and liners, as well as hide shirts and robes worn by acclaimed warriors.

The Blackfoot treaty with the Dominion of Canada and the British Crown in 1877 virtually ended Kainai participation in intertribal warfare. The last buffalo hunt to sustain the Bloods occurred in the winter of 1880-81, after which life changed dramatically. The different bands of the Kainai came together within the confines of a land reserve (called the 'Blood Reserve') in southern Alberta provided by the federal government, where they depended on rations of beef and flour issued twice a week by the Indian Department.

The return of the last buffalo hunters was witnessed by Reverend John MacLean, a Methodist missionary. He held a deep scholarly interest in the Bloods and during his nine years among them learned much about their history and culture. In 1892 MacLean embarked on a lecture tour of England and Scotland. Billed as "the pioneer Blackfoot Indian missionary," his lectures were largely about the

Blackfoot. He accompanied the lectures with Blackfoot songs and an exhibition of their artifacts. MacLean usually wore his buckskin "cowboy missionary suit," and was assisted by a lady and gentleman dressed in traditional Blackfoot regalia.¹

The amateur English anthropologist and astronomer, Sir Cuthbert Peek, must have attended one of those lectures. On February 6, 1892 he made a contribution toward MacLean's church and expressed a desire to acquire "specimens of picture writing with translation"² for his "collection of the native literature of the world."³ MacLean asked the Indian Agent on the Blood Reserve, James Wilson, to make inquiries in this regard. Wilson wrote back on September 25, 1893, and explained his difficulties in finding a suitable painting:

Within the last year or so quite a trade has been done in painted robes here but then they are all nearly the lives of the painters & show what [war] deeds they have performed. I am under the impression what you want is the old fables painted or some such thing as these. If you merely want painted robes showing a warrior stealing horses, etc then I can get one at about four dollars or so a piece.⁴

About three months later Wilson sent MacLean the robe and translation, along with a note explaining that "Dave" had set the price at six dollars.⁵ Dave probably refers to David Mills, a translator on the Blood Reserve. He must have commissioned Many Shots to execute the painting and provide a verbal account of the depicted events. Wilson transcribed the text before sending it to MacLean.

Unfortunately we know more about how the robe was acquired than about who painted it. MacLean described Many Shots as "one of my Blood Indian friends"⁶ and a "Blood Indian chief," yet little is known about this individual. There was a Kainai named Many Shots who lived before the treaties, but he was killed around 1872 when a fight broke out between a group of Siksika (another Blackfoot division) and Kainai.⁷ Interestingly, a Siksika by the name of Many Shots fought in the same battle. William Pocklington, Kainai Agent from 1884 to 1891, noted that 'Many Shot' is termed more properly 'Many Wounds' on the treaty payment records.⁸ This individual, who is our prime candidate for executing the painting, transferred to the Siksika Reserve in late 1883 or 1884.⁹ Tracing him further seems unlikely for, according to the 1901 census, there were four men named Many Shot, and one Many Wounds, on the Siksika Reserve.

Northern Plains Indians viewed pictorial painting in the same light as writing, as a means of stating facts and recording events. The Blackfoot use one word to mean both painting and writing. By the same token, Europeans used terms like pictography, hieroglyphics and picture-writing to describe Plains Indian painting. Blackfoot painting particularly lent itself to such terminology because it is

narrative and ideographic. However, by the time Many Shots executed his commission, Blackfoot painting had been significantly influenced by European painting, shifting toward the pictorial side of the picture-writing equation.¹⁰

Such influences become clear when comparing Many Shots' robe with earlier Blackfoot examples.¹¹ Traditionally, robes were of a single buffalo hide worn lengthwise around the body. Many Shots' robe is made from the hide of a beef cow killed at the ration house on the Blood Reserve. Normally, only a few hides were given to the Kainai for making moccasins and other necessary articles, with the bulk sent east to be sold commercially.¹² The painted figures on earlier robes were all upright, at ninety degrees to the spine of the hide, approximately stacked in tiers, so the hero was enveloped from head to foot by a readable display of his deeds. In contrast, Many Shots appeared to have oriented his figures in relation to his position as he painted his way around the perimeter of the hide. On the early robes a decorative quillwork or beadwork strip was often attached along the spine and encircled the waist of the wearer, giving the robe a more completed look. It seems likely that these breaks with tradition are attributable to the fact that Many Shots' robe was never meant to be worn.

Traditionally, oral recitation was more important than pictography as a means of publicly broadcasting war deeds in the Blackfoot community. The verbal recounting of war deeds was a key formality in at least eighteen different Blackfoot religious and civil ceremonies. These oral accounts were often very detailed, sometimes staged with elaborate props and a large cast of players. Their corresponding pictographs on the early paintings were much abbreviated, relying upon shorthand ideographic devices. In contrast, Many Shots' pictorial style tends toward fuller, more realistic visual depiction. He employs greater numbers of humans and horses to tell his stories. Human figures show a degree of anatomical accuracy which contrast with their more conventionalized, geometric counterparts in early paintings. Their profile forms impart a sense of movement not found in the static, frontally depicted earlier figures.

In the end, Many Shots' robe tells us as much about late nineteenth century life on the Blood Reserve as the days of inter-tribal warfare. In comparing Many Shots' written account with his corresponding pictorial narrative it is clear that significant details are lacking or confused. These may be a reflection of the linguistic and social disconnect between the English and Blackfoot speaking communities. Similarly, the mixture of European and Blackfoot pictorial conventions on Many Shots' robe exemplifies the many social adjustments required of the Kainai after settling on their reserve.

The study of Plains Indian war paintings has long been hampered by problems of accessibility. There are hundreds of surviving works, several perhaps dating to earlier than 1800, but they are scattered in collections around the world. The paintings are usually large, filled with small figures inscribed on

textured surfaces, and over time have lost much of their clarity. Consequently, these works do not easily lend themselves to either first hand examination or photographic reproduction. To alleviate these difficulties I produce digital renderings of the originals. I begin by tracing onto plastic film placed directly on top of the original painting. Then I transform the life-size tracing, which in the case of a buffalo robe measures about seven feet in length, into a scanned digital image. Using graphic software I add colour to the outline drawing, projecting detailed slides of the original onto a screen alongside my computer, to serve as a guide. There are several advantages of electronic drawings. Most importantly they can be viewed and published with all details clearly visible. Specific features, such as certain types of human figures, can be freely "cut and pasted" and compared side by side with corresponding elements from other paintings. To better facilitate comparative analysis I have used the same background colour to represent the hide supports in the forty or so drawings rendered thus far. I heightened the foreground colours on *Many Shots'* robe to compensate for the changes which occurred in the original pigments over time.

In the following detailed look at *Many Shots* robe individual events are placed in cells, following much the same order as the translations which James Wilson sent to Reverend MacLean. Wilson's translation for each pictorial event is shown uppermost in each cell, highlighted against a black background, with my own commentary below.

NOTES:

- 1 United Church Archives/Victoria University Archives, Toronto, Ontario, John MacLean Papers, poster for lecture.
- 2 United Church Archives/Victoria University Archives, Toronto, Ontario, John MacLean Papers, Box 1, File 14, letter from Peek to MacLean.
- 3 MacLean 1924.
- 4 United Church Archives/Victoria University Archives, Toronto, Ontario, John MacLean Papers, Box 1, File 18, letter from Wilson to MacLean.
- 5 United Church Archives/Victoria University Archives, Toronto, Ontario, John MacLean Papers, Box 1, File 18, undated letter from Wilson to MacLean.
- 6 Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Accession File 1895.6 1.1, letter from MacLean to Peek, August 1, 1894.
- 7 Kehoe and Kehoe 1957.
- 8 Blood Agency letter-book. Present day Kainai suggest that a better translation for "Many Shots" might be "Shot Many Times," a term which is closer in meaning to "Many Wounds." "Many shots" was the Blackfoot term for the repeating rifle, first introduced in southern Alberta around 1869.
- 9 Blood Agency letter-book.
- 10 Brownstone 1993.
- 11 For examples of early Blackfoot paintings see Brownstone 2001.
- 12 Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Accession File 1895.6 1.1, Note from MacLean to Peek.
- 13 Pitt Rivers museum, See the unpublished report by Sophie Rowe, "The Life of Many Shots: results of pigment analysis of a Blackfoot Indian cow robe, now in the Pitt Rivers Museum."
- 14 James Dempsey, pers. Comm., October 20, 2004

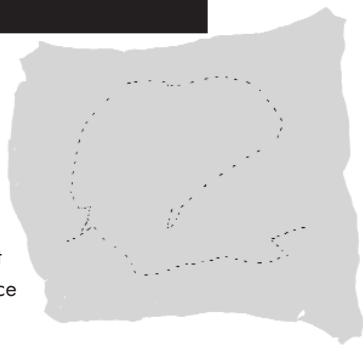
Begin at where you find 2 lodges and two carts. Large party with M. Shots following foot marks of their horses which have been stolen. Catch up with party and M. S. shoots the last man - the black spots are the bullets flying.



Many Shots is in the midst of the mounted warriors, barely identifiable by the bullets flying from his gun toward his bleeding foe. Three horses in his war party bear the "heart line" motif, a curving arrow leading from the mouth to the heart and two ovoid shapes suggesting the kidneys. Unique to Many Shots' painting are streak-like flourishes of paint between figures which give an impression of groundscape and movement. It appears that Many Shots used a European paint brush in favour of porous bone painting wedges which were traditionally employed, one for each colour, in hide painting. He also used commercially manufactured paints.¹³

Large spots (-) mark all his journeys.

The large dashes, or footprints, perhaps emphasize Many Shots' victories on the war trail, or were added to better enable the collector to connect the pictures to the translation. The order of events traced by the dashes is not precisely the same as the sequence of events in the translation.



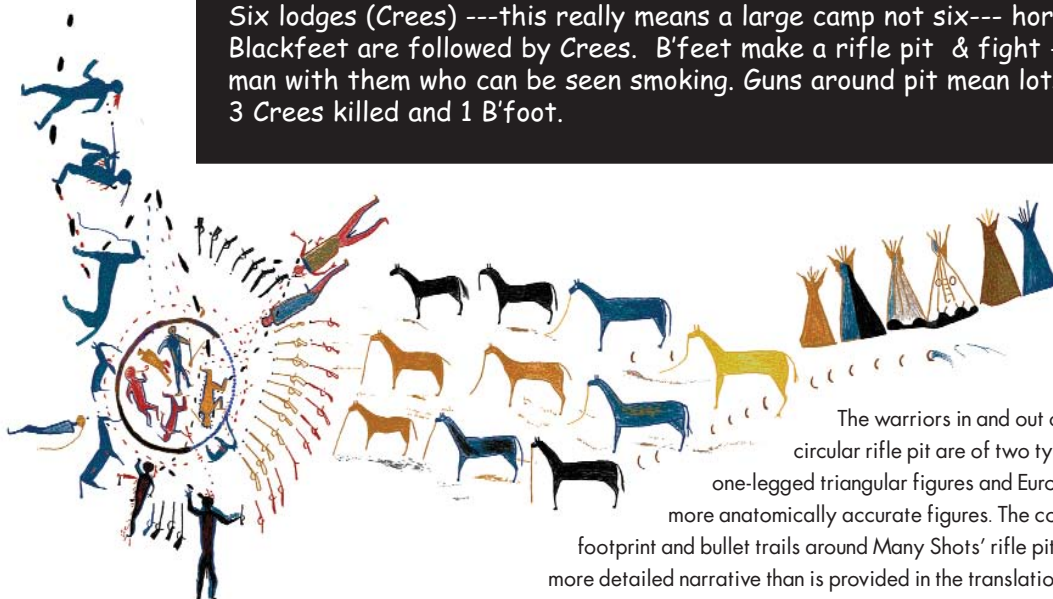
M. S.' wife is riding out & follows & kills an antelope with an axe & then a bear.



Only rarely did warriors record the exploits of their wives. The bear killed by

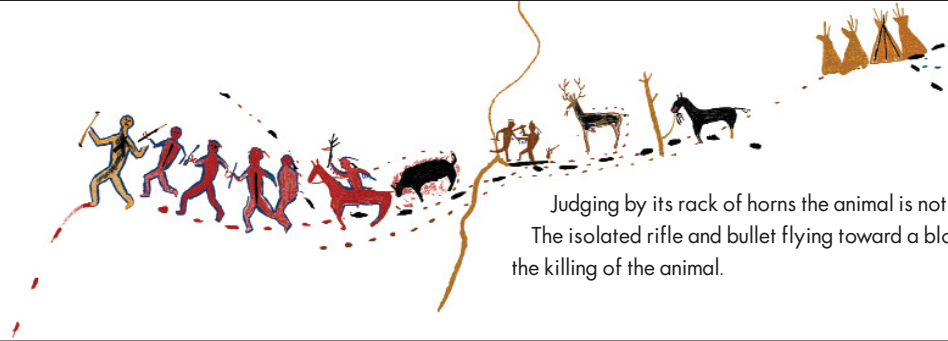
Many Shots' wife is a grizzly bear, as identified by the slight hump over the front shoulders. The killing of a ferocious grizzly in hand to hand combat typically counted as a war deed. Killing a swift antelope by means of an axe must have been a highly unusual event, and perhaps for this reason was recorded on the robe.

Six lodges (Crees) ---this really means a large camp not six--- horses stolen by Blackfeet are followed by Crees. B'feet make a rifle pit & fight - Had Medicine man with them who can be seen smoking. Guns around pit mean lots of Indians - 3 Crees killed and 1 B'foot.



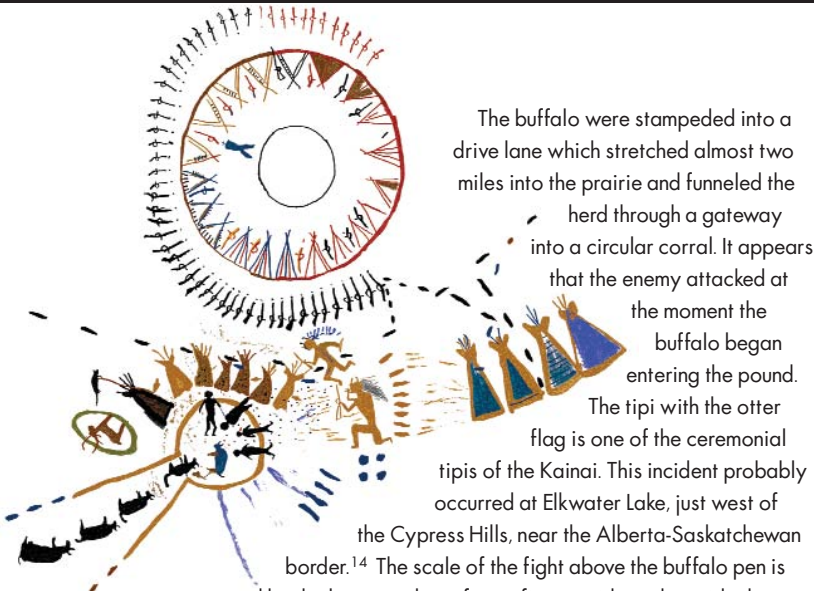
The warriors in and out of Many Shots' circular rifle pit are of two types: traditional, one-legged triangular figures and European influenced, more anatomically accurate figures. The complex array of footprint and bullet trails around Many Shots' rifle pit suggest a much more detailed narrative than is provided in the translation.

Four lodges- Crees stole the horses - went in pursuit- killed an antelope on the way- met an Indian and stabbed him- still following up Crees - came to a place where the 5 Crees had killed a buffalo - overtook the 5 and killed one with his axe. four escaped-



Judging by its rack of horns the animal is not an antelope but most likely an elk. The isolated rifle and bullet flying toward a bloody wound economically conveys the killing of the animal.

Large circle of lodges where there was a big fight - Below a large buffalo pen showing how he (M. S.) used to kill his buffalo. Lake with an elk in the middle means Elk Lake.



The buffalo were stampeded into a drive lane which stretched almost two miles into the prairie and funneled the herd through a gateway into a circular corral. It appears that the enemy attacked at the moment the buffalo began entering the pound.

The tipi with the otter flag is one of the ceremonial tipis of the Kainai. This incident probably occurred at Elkwater Lake, just west of the Cypress Hills, near the Alberta-Saskatchewan border.¹⁴ The scale of the fight above the buffalo pen is

suggested by the large number of guns firing inside and outside the camp circle. The information provided in the translation falls short of adequately explaining the relationship between the three encampments and the several fights depicted in this complex scene.

Three Sioux Inds. shot one man. His two companions ran away. He fired & killed the one behind the one he fired at.



Many Shots, wearing his war medicine in the form of a bird skin tied to his hair, had three companions. One was shot, two ran away, and Many Shots stayed, shooting one of the enemy.

Came upon two Inds. Fighting - Fired & broke the leg of one of & then ran up & killed him - took away his bow & arrows which is seen along with the 7 guns which he took during his fights.



The capture of weapons, especially guns, ranked highest among Blackfoot war deeds. Often discrete sections of Blackfoot robes were devoted to a tally of weapons and other valuable objects captured from the enemy.



The final event on Many Shots' robe is one that is not mentioned in the translation. It shows a man, mounted on an antelope, while apparently stabbing it. To the right is a discarded gun.

The 13 long strokes means 13 fights in which he was engaged during his life time.



This total reflects a relatively modest war record.

Acknowledgements

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