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# THE BLOND MANDAN: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF AN OLD PROBLEM<sup>1</sup>

MARSHALL T. NEWMAN

## INTRODUCTION

SOME of the 18th and 19th century explorers and traders visiting the Mandan Indians on the upper Missouri River were struck by physical and cultural features that seemed out of place to them in the northern Plains. Their reports of blondism and other non-Indian physical traits, an unusual language and mythology, fortified villages and a developed horticulture provided the evidence for two theories of Mandan origin through pre-Columbian contact with Europeans. One of these theories, widely held in the latter part of the 18th century, and revived in 1841 by the artist George Catlin, was that the Mandan were the descendants of a legendary 12th century expedition of Welsh led by Madoc.<sup>2</sup> The other theory claimed the Mandan to be the mixed descendants of Scandinavian explorers. The most recent version of this theory identifies the Scandinavians as members of a 14th century expedition led by Paul Knutson.<sup>3</sup> These theories stimulated me to look into the question of blondism and other non-Indian physical traits attributed to the Mandan of one to two centuries ago.

The information bearing upon this question lies almost wholly in the explorers' and traders' reports. The few Mandan living today are too mixed with other tribes and with recent Whites to give any clear picture of what the pre-contact Mandan were like.<sup>4</sup> There are, however, a few early portraits and photographs (see Plates 1 to 3). Only a few identifiably Mandan skeletons have been recovered,<sup>5</sup> not enough to provide representative data. Therefore I have had to be

1 This paper is an outgrowth of one read before the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, April 12, 1949. (Published with the permission of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.)

2 See Williams, 1949, for a historical summary of the Madoc legend.

3. Holand, 1940, Chapter 22.

4 The only anthropometric study of living Mandan is a mixed series of 156 Mandan and Hidatsa men measured at the Worlds Columbian Exposition in 1893 and briefly noted by Boas (1895, p. 389). Twelve measurements, as well as observations on nose form, eye form, hair, eye and skin color were taken by a group of hastily trained observers. Boas felt that the personal error in most of these determinations was too great to permit valid comparative analyses, and hence he published only the bare figures on stature and cephalic index on putatively full-blooded Indians from a number of tribes. It is understood that the Department of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, is reworking the Columbian Exposition measurements.

5 Strong (1940, p. 363) mentioned 7 adult Mandan crania from the Old Fort Abraham Lincoln site, and 1 more skull from the Double Ditch site. In the United States National Museum collections is 1 Mandan skull (U.S.N.M. 262,136) acquired from Prof W. K. Moorehead, from "a Mandan village site, North Dakota." These comprise all the Mandan skeletal material a casual search uncovered.

content with an analysis of the eye-witness reports. The areas of agreement in these reports have provided several points of high probable validity which I have interpreted in the light of modern knowledge.

#### REPORTS OF WHITE INDIANS

The earliest reports of White Indians that I have located were those told to La Verendrye in the 1720's before he made the first recorded visit to the Mandan. His informants were the Cree and Assiniboine around the Lake of the Woods. According to La Verendrye, they

. . . took the Ouachipounnes [Mandan] for Frenchmen; they talk and sing like us, their forts and houses are very much like ours, except that the roofs are flat and covered with earth and stones, and their houses have cellars in which they store their Indian corn in great wicker baskets . . . .

They are very tall of stature, white in colour, with hair light, chestnut, and red, and in a few cases black; they have beards which they either cut or pull out, though a few allow it to grow; they walk with their feet turned out. . . .<sup>6</sup>

This description continued for several pages, giving quite complete treatment to the actual manners and customs of the Mandan, embroidered, however, with strange figments of Cree-Assiniboine imagination.<sup>7</sup>

In 1738, however, La Verendrye was able to lead a party to the Mandan villages. After his first meeting with the Mandan, when thirty of them were present, his reaction was strong:

I confess I was greatly surprised, as I expected to see people quite different from the other savages according to the stories that had been told us. They [the Mandan] do not differ from the Assiniboin, being naked except for a garment of buffalo skin carelessly worn without any breechcloth. I knew then that there was a large discount to be taken off all that had been told me.<sup>8</sup>

La Verendrye visited only one of the smaller Mandan villages and had been there only three days when he was deserted by his Cree interpreter. Thus, during the remaining two days of his stay, he was reduced to communicating with the Mandan by signs. In this manner he received an accurate, apparently eye-witness account of the Spanish colonists to the South. However he apparently did not recognize these ". . . people white like ourselves who worked in iron" as Spaniards.<sup>9</sup>

6 Burpee, 1927, pp. 119-120.

7 Burpee, 1927, p. 10.

8 Burpee, 1927, pp. 319-320.

9 Burpee, 1927, pp. 336-337.

When La Verendrye returned to the Assiniboine, he chided them for their fabrications about the Mandan. The Assiniboine replied "... that they did not mean the Mandan when they spoke of a nation like us, that they meant the nation that dwells down the river and that works in iron."<sup>10</sup> It would seem that the Assiniboine, as well as the Mandan, knew of the Spanish.

La Verendrye's visit to the Mandan set off a number of White Indian reports which filtered back from the frontiers to the White settlements in the east. Coues mentioned a 1764 trader's list of aborigines in which figured "the Mandanes or Blanc Barbus [White Beards]," seen by La Verendrye.<sup>11</sup> The latter, by the way, said nothing about white beards in his journals. Another garbled version of what appears to be La Verendrye's visit was reported in 1805 by a Mr B. Durocher,<sup>12</sup> but referred to his recollections of a conversation with Canadian travellers in Montreal over twenty-five years before. According to these recollections, sometime prior to 1760 the French government sent a party of fifty to sixty Canadians to make discoveries toward the source of the Missouri River. About 600-700 leagues above the Missouri's juncture with the Mississippi, the party's progress was

... stopped by meeting with an Indian nation, very numerous, having long beards and a complexion as white as that of Europeans, and their language totally different from that of the nations which they had passed, so that it was impossible to understand them; but they [the party] perceived very quickly the great discontent which their presence in the country occasioned, so that they were unable to prevail upon any of them to accept of the least present.

This extraordinary circumstance determined them to leave as soon as possible to continue their voyage in ascending the river; but it was then that this nation arose in arms against them, making threatening signs, and prohibiting any further ascent into their country, and obliging them to alter their course.<sup>13</sup>

Another and more general White Indian story was published in 1784:

Letters from Boston mention that a new nation of White people has been discovered about 2,000 miles beyond the Appalachian Mountains. They are said to be acquainted with the principles of the Christian religion, and to be exceedingly courteous and civilized. This account was brought by the Indians to Boston, and concurs with others which were reported by two French missionaries at Montreal last year.<sup>14</sup>

Indians were usually the originators of these White Indian stories. Whether

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10 Burpee, 1927, p. 354.

11 Coues, 1893, p. 159 fn.

12 *Medical Repository*, 1806, pp. 113-114.

13 *Medical Repository*, *loc. cit.*

14 *Pennsylvania Packet*, Aug. 24, 1784.

"they were incapable of telling a plain unvarnished tale,"<sup>15</sup> or whether their White listeners simply mistook stories of the Spaniards for stories of the Mandan is uncertain. But the result was that explorers were on the lookout for civilized White Indians. In some cases this may have influenced their eye-witness reports.

#### WHITE INTERMIXTURE

Another factor to consider is intermixture between the Mandan and the explorers and traders themselves. To document this, we must review the history of White visitors to the Mandan villages. In 1738 La Verendrye's party of twenty-five whites feasted for five days in one of the smaller villages. Two of the party were left there nine months to learn the language. In 1742 La Verendrye's sons returned to the Mandan villages on their way east. Between 1742 and 1763, when France ceded Canada to Britain, other French visits to the Mandan were likely; in fact there is a brief mention of one such visit in 1750.<sup>16</sup> Menard, the first squaw-man to the Mandan, came to stay with them about 1765.<sup>17</sup>

Following the cession of Canada to Britain, independent traders from Montreal began filtering into the Mandan villages by the overland route. Macintosh's party arrived there in 1773.<sup>18</sup> The increase in independent traders spurred the Hudsons Bay Company into greater activity. This in turn forced the independents to form the North West Company in 1784. From then on, the Mandan villages were the gateway to the upper Missouri fur trade. As the competition between the rival companies heightened, the number of White visitors increased. In 1793 Fort Mandan was erected as a special wintering post.

The Commercial Company of St Louis brought more White traders to the Mandan villages by keel boat, from 1796 until its bankruptcy a few years later. Beginning in 1807, the keel boats of the Missouri Fur Company also carried trade goods to the Mandan villages, and returned to St Louis with furs. By 1820, however, fur trading was carried on past the declining Mandan to the more westerly tribes.

There can be no doubt that during all these years many White men visited the Mandan, and that considerable numbers wintered in their villages. Thompson, whose visit was in 1797, leaves little doubt as to how these White men were received, when he says,

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15 Burpee, 1927, p. 10.

16 Schoolcraft, 1853, p. 248.

17 Larocque, 1910, p. 17. In 1805 Menard was said to have lived about forty years with the Mandan.

18 Schoolcraft, 1853, p. 248.

The curse of the Mandanes is an almost total want of chastity; this, the men with me knew, and I found it was almost their sole motive for the journey hereto. The goods they brought, they sold at 50 to 60 percent above what they cost; and reserving enough to pay their debts, and buy corn, spent the rest on women.<sup>19</sup>

With sexual access to Mandan women easy, the probable genetic effect of the White man's visits can be roughly outlined. From the first known visit by La Verendrye in 1738 to the 1780's, it is probable that sojourns in the Mandan villages by Europeans were only occasional and the number of mixed offspring small. From about 1790 on, however, the volume of White visitors increased, so that by the time of Lewis and Clark's visit (1804-05) considerable intermixture probably had taken place. When Catlin and Maximilian arrived in the 1830's, there probably had been enough interbreeding to form a mixed-breed group of one or two generations' standing.

The effect of White admixture was undoubtedly accentuated by the decline of Mandan population from an estimated 8,000-15,000 in 1738 to 1,520 in 1797.<sup>20</sup> The sharpest decline was during the severe smallpox epidemic of 1781, shortly after which Sioux war parties destroyed the nine Mandan villages in the Heart River area. The survivors fled up the Missouri to join the Hidatsa near the mouth of the Knife River.

#### EYE-WITNESS REPORTS

La Verendrye's bare report of the physical characteristics of the Mandan as he saw them in 1738 is in apparent contradiction to his denial of Mandan distinctiveness from other tribes (see p. 256). He stated,

This tribe is of mixed blood, black and white. The women are rather handsome, particularly the light-colored ones; they have an abundance of fair hair.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Tyrrell, 1916, pp. 234-235.

<sup>20</sup> In 1738 La Verendrye visited only the upstream village on the east bank of the Missouri near the mouth of the Heart River. There he counted 130 earth lodges. The other five villages downstream were larger, according to his native informants. In fact, one of La Verendrye's sons visited a larger downstream village and declared it to be twice the size of the one upstream (Burpee, 1927, p. 344). Will and Spinden (1906, p. 99) assumed therefore at least 1000 lodges in the six villages. Interpolating from Lewis and Clark's statement (Coues, 1893, p. 197) that the two remaining villages in 1805 totalled 100 lodges and could muster 350 warriors, Will and Spinden estimated the 1738 population to have been at least 15,000.

Using Will and Spinden's lodge estimate of 1,000, but following Thompson's 1797 estimate (Tyrrell, 1916, p. 228) of eight individuals per lodge, I estimate a minimum of 8,000 Mandan in 1738.

Thompson's 1797 population estimate for 190 Mandan lodges was 1520 (Tyrrell, 1916, p. 228).

<sup>21</sup> Burpee, 1927, p. 340.

There are certain ambiguities in this statement that are hard to resolve. For example, the phrase “. . . of mixed blood, black and white” suggests that he was only describing the range of hair color, since Indian skin color in the northern Plains could hardly be described as black. This suggestion is strengthened by two other points which are discussed on page 264.

The next account is that of d'Eglise, who pioneered the upstream route from St Louis to the Mandan villages in 1790. He remarked to Trudeau that the Mandan “. . . are white like Europeans, much more civilized than any other Indians.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1796-97, John Evans, in the employ of the Missouri Fur Company, spent over six months with the Mandan. He was thoroughly familiar with the story of the 12th century expedition of Welsh led by Madoc; in fact, Thomas Jefferson himself believed that Evans' “. . . original object . . . had been to go in search of the Welsh Indians said to be up the Missouri.”<sup>23</sup> Although Evans did not comment on the physical characteristics of the Mandan, his observations forced him to deny the existence of Welsh Indians along the Missouri.<sup>24</sup>

According to David Thompson, who saw the Mandan in 1797,

Both men and women are of a stature fully equal to Europeans; and as fair as our french canadians; their eyes of a dark hazel, their hair of dark brown or black, but not coarse; prominent nose, cheek bones moderate.<sup>25</sup>

Lewis and Clark, who wintered with the Mandan in 1804-05, made general comment on their light pigmentation, and remarked upon a half-breed boy among them.<sup>26</sup> Sgt Gass, in the same party, stated, “These Indians have better [lighter?] complexions than most other Indians, and many of the children have fair hair.”<sup>27</sup>

Alexander Henry, who visited the Mandan during the summer of 1806, had this to say:

What struck me as extraordinary among these people was several children about 10 years old, whose hair was perfectly grey, and who thus resembled aged persons; those I saw were all girls. The people in general have not such strong coarse hair as other natives of North America; they have it much finer, rather inclining to dark brown, and I observed some whose hair was almost fair. . . . Their eyes are not of that jet black which is common to other Indians, but, like their hair, inclined to a dark brown; some few are dark grey.<sup>28</sup>

22 Nasatir, 1927, pp. 57-58.

23 Thwaites, 1904, pp. 291-292.

24 Monthly Magazine, pp. 161-162.

25 Tyrrell, 1916, p. 233.

26 Coues, 1893, vol. 1, p. 185.

27 Gass, 1811, p. 59.

28 Coues, 1897, p. 341.



Bradbury, who passed through the Mandan villages in 1811, indicated his surprise that the wife and child of one of the chiefs had brown hair, although ". . . their skins did not appear to be lighter coloured than the rest of the tribe."<sup>29</sup> The wife was said to be over forty years of age, and therefore not as likely as a younger person to have been a mixed-breed.

The fullest description of the Mandan comes from the artist Catlin who visited their villages in 1832. The following statements seem to have been slanted in support of his Welsh Indian theory.

A stranger in the Mandan village is first struck with the different shades of complexion and various colours of hair which he sees in a crowd about him; and is at once almost disposed to exclaim that "these are not Indians."

There are a great many of these people whose complexions appear as light as half-breeds; and amongst the women particularly, there are many whose skins are almost white, with the most pleasing symmetry and proportion of the features; with hazel, with grey, and with blue eyes. . . .

The diversity in the colour of the hair is almost equally as great as that in the complexion; for in a numerous group of these people (and more particularly amongst the females, who never take pains to change its natural colour, as the men often do), there may be seen every shade and colour of hair that can be seen in our own country [England], with the exception of red or auburn, which is not to be found. . . . There are very many, of both sexes and of every age, from infancy to manhood to old age, with hair of a bright silvery grey, and in some instances almost perfectly white. . . . I have ascertained, on a careful enquiry, that about 1 in 10 or 12 of the whole tribe are what the French call "cheveux gris" . . . and that this strange and unaccountable phenomenon is not the result of disease or habit, but that it is unquestionably a hereditary character which runs in families. . . . And by passing this hair through my hands, . . . I have found it uniformly to be as coarse and harsh as a horse's mane; differing materially from the hair of other colours, which amongst the Mandans, is generally as fine and as soft as silk.<sup>30</sup>

In a later publication, Catlin gave a rather different version of the Mandan appearance.

In complexion, colour of hair, and eyes, they generally bore a family resemblance to the rest of the American tribes, but there were exceptions, constituting perhaps one-fifth or one-sixth part of the tribe, whose complexions were nearly white, with hair of a silvery-grey from childhood to old age, their eyes light blue, their faces oval, devoid of the salient angles so strongly characterizing all other American tribes and owing, unquestionably, to the infusion of some foreign stock.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Bradbury, 1817, p. 150.

<sup>30</sup> Catlin, 1841, pp. 93-94. From his hair studies on the modern United States population, Dr Stanley M. Garn states, "While grey adult hair is frequently larger in diameter than pigmented hair, much of this apparent size difference is an optical illusion."

<sup>31</sup> Catlin, 1867, p. 5.



The differences between the two statements suggest that in his later writings Catlin decided that because of recent White admixture only the strange combination of grey hair, light skin and eyes, and oval faces constituted good evidence of Welsh influence. Unfortunately for his argument, his portrait (Plate 1) of a Mandan girl with grey hair fails to show light skin and eye color.

Maximilian, the first trained scientist to see the Mandan, reached their villages in the early summer of 1833, and returned to them that autumn. He held a very low opinion of Catlin's Welsh Indian theory, and stated that there was no evidence of White influence in the Mandan villages prior to the 18th Century. Of the physical appearance of the Mandan he stated,

Their physiognomy is, in general, the same as that of most of the Missouri Indians, but their noses are not so long and arched as those of the Sioux, nor have they such high cheekbones. The nose of the Mandans and Manitaires [Hidatsa] is not as broad—sometimes aquiline or slightly curved, and often quite straight. The eyes are, in general, long and narrow, of a dark brown colour. The mouth is broad, large, rather prominent, and the lower jaw broad and angular. . . . Their hair is long, thick, lank and black. . . . That of the children is often only dark brown, especially at the tips. . . . There are whole families among them, as well as among the Blackfeet, whose hair is grey, or black mixed with white, so that the whole head appears grey.<sup>32</sup>

Maximilian also spoke of a Mandan man between twenty and thirty years old, who had "distinct locks of brown, black, silvery grey [hair], but mostly white, and his eyebrows perfectly white."<sup>33</sup>

Of skin color he stated,

The colour of these Indians is a fine brown, sometimes reddish, more or less dark, which might, sometimes, come under the denomination of copper colour. In some it is more of a greyish-brown, in others yellowish; after a thorough ablution the skin of some of them appears almost white, and even some colour in their cheeks.<sup>34</sup>

He also indicated that the notion that the Mandan had "fairer complexions" than other Indians was as unfounded as the assertion that they spoke Gaelic.<sup>35</sup>

D. D. Mitchell, an American Fur Company trader and later an Indian Agency superintendent, came to the upper Missouri country in 1830. It is probable that he visited the Mandan villages before the smallpox epidemic of 1837. Mitchell stated that the Mandan were

altogether different from the Indians occupying that region of the country. . . . Apart

32 Thwaites, 1906, pp. 255-256.

33 Thwaites, 1906, pp. 256.

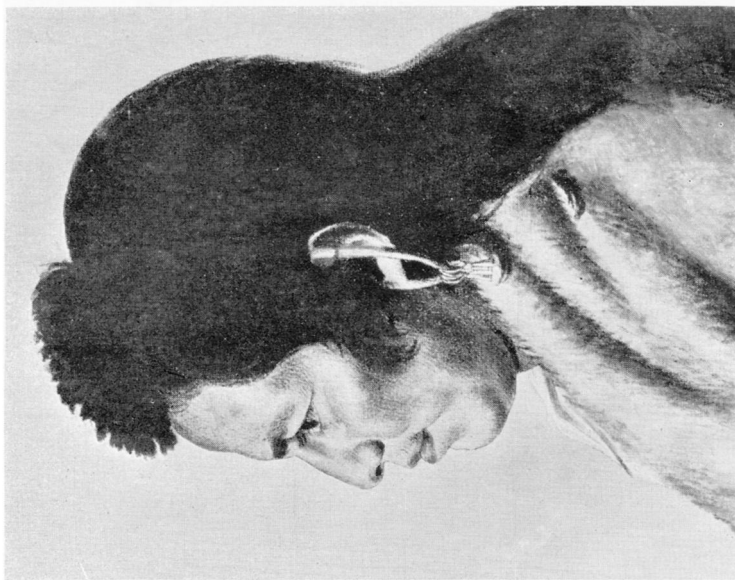
34 Thwaites, 1906, pp. 258.

35 Thwaites, 1906, p. 366.



MANDAN GIRL

George Catlin's portrait of a 12-year old Mandan girl with grey hair (Catlin no. 134). The apparent light patch at the hair line on the forehead is actually red in the painting. (Original in the United States National Museum.)



MANDAN MEN

St Mémín's portrait of Shahaka, also known as "Big White," a Mandan chief, born in 1765. Portrait made in 1804 using a very accurate physiognometric technique. (Original in the New York Historical Society.)

Rushing War Eagle, a Mandan head chief, born in 1831. Photograph taken in 1874. Has appearance of being unmixed. (From Bureau of American Ethnology archives.)

from their peculiar language and habits, there is a physical peculiarity. A large portion of the Mandans have grey hair, and blue or light brown eyes, with a Jewish cast of features. It is not uncommon to see children of both sexes, from 5 to 6 years of age, with hair perfectly grey. They are also much fairer than the prairie or mountain tribes; though this may be attributable to the fact of their living in dirt lodges and less exposed to the sun. . . .<sup>36</sup>

After the smallpox epidemic reduced the Mandan to one hundred survivors (two of whom are pictured in Plates 2 and 3), two more observers provide us with pertinent comments. The first is the artist, Rudolph Kurz, who spent the early summer of 1850 at Fort Berthold. There he remarked upon a 14-year-old Mandan girl with entirely grey hair. She was referred to by Pierre Garreau as "la blonde."<sup>37</sup> Of the premature greying, Kurz stated that it ". . . is said to be quite general among the Mandan—a sort of family misfortune, not due to severe disease."<sup>38</sup> On blondism he asserted that,

What Catlin calls blond hair among the Mandan is nothing more than sun-burned hair that is not continually smeared with grease. . . . I may mention, also, that the lighter color of some Indians' skin (not only Mandan) is easily traced to the "Whites."<sup>39</sup>

The second post-epidemic observer was Washington Matthews. He spent several years at Fort Berthold in the late 1860's, and although his writings primarily concerned the Hidatsa, he had this to say about Indian blondism:

Among various tribes of western Indians may be found individuals, claiming pure aboriginal blood, who possess complexions much fairer than the average Indian, with light-colored eyes and hair. Such individuals are more common among the Mandans and Minnetaries [Hidatsa] than they are among most neighboring tribes. A natural or inherited clearness of complexion, too, is more easily discernible among members of village tribes than roving bands who are more exposed to the weather. The presence of pale Indians in these tribes was noted by travellers in the early days before intermarriages with whites were common enough to have accounted for it. . . . I have heard old Mandan say that when the Minnetaries, including the Crows, first came among them, the strangers were a fairer race than they. . . . It is not necessary to suppose an intermixture of European blood in order to account for lightness of color in an Indian. There is no reason why marked varieties of color should not arise in the Red Race as it has done in other races of man. . . . I have seen full-blooded Indians who were whiter than some half-breeds and whiter than the darkest representatives of the Aryan Race. An increase of hairiness is a more reliable sign of Caucasian blood in an Indian than a

<sup>36</sup> Schoolcraft, 1853, p. 253.

<sup>37</sup> Hewitt and Jarrell, 1937, p. 96.

<sup>38</sup> *Idem*, p. 88.

<sup>39</sup> *Idem*, p. 100.

diminution of color of the skin; and I never could discover that those fair Indians, claiming pure blood, were more hairy than others.<sup>40</sup>

Matthews quite properly considered premature greying separately. He stated:

Among various western tribes, individuals may be found who are characterized, even in childhood, by having coarse grey hair. From all I could see and learn, I should think that such persons are more numerous among the Minnetaries and Mandans than in any other tribe; and they are perhaps the most numerous among the Mandans.<sup>41</sup>

#### ANALYSIS OF EYE-WITNESS REPORTS

In presenting La Verendrye's bare statement that the Mandan were ". . . of mixed blood, black and white," it was suggested (see p. 260) that he was only speaking of hair color, since Indian skin color in the northern Plains could hardly be described as black. The reference to "white" is more likely to mean the premature greying of the hair, which, as we have seen, was common among the Mandan of the 19th century. Indeed, the last part of La Verendrye's statement, in the original French, reads ". . . surtout beaucoup de cheveu blon et *blanc*" (italics mine). This bracketing of blond and white hair may represent the same terminologic confusion seen in Pierre Gareau's allusion much later to a prematurely greying teen-age Mandan girl as "la blonde" (see p. 263). Furthermore, it may be pertinent that Catlin<sup>42</sup> noted that the young Mandan men with grey hair went to great pains to darken it with clays and dyes, but that the women did not bother to do so. Could this be the reason why, a century earlier, La Verendrye remarked on the "light colored women" but said nothing about the men?

If indeed, La Verendrye was referring to premature greying, this was the first of many references to this phenomenon among the Mandan. In fact, most of the eye-witness reports mention premature greying or whitening of the hair. Some of these reports indicated that it tended to run in families and seemed to affect both sexes equally. From a "careful enquiry" Catlin estimated that premature greying occurred in 1 in 10 or 1 in 12 of the entire tribe.

Undoubtedly this greying phenomenon was some kind of achromotrichia,<sup>43</sup> more likely the diffuse type than one of the pattern types, and neither sex-linked nor sex-influenced. Insofar as achromotrichia is understood, it is not linked genetically with light pigmentation of the skin and eyes, or with "non-salient"

40 Matthews, 1877, pp. 43-45.

41 Matthews, 1877, p. 45.

42 Catlin, 1841, p. 94.

43 Achromotrichia may be generally defined as the absence of pigment in the hair. Dr Garn states that the achromotrichia he studied in the modern United States population acts like a partial autosomal dominant without being sex-influenced.



European facial features (see p. 261). According to Maximilian (p. 262), Matthews (p. 264) and Garrand, premature greying cropped up in other Western tribes. Writing in the 1840's, Garrand stated,

The queerest oddities with the Cheyennes are gray-haired children. From the age of three, up, they can be seen going about, like so many old men and women. The hair is not white or tow, but real streaked, black and gray, such as we would see on a man of forty-five.<sup>44</sup>

Matthews believed that premature greying was probably most common among the Mandan, and secondarily the Hidatsa.

All accounts agree that some of the Mandan were at least as light-skinned as darker Europeans. Not all agree, however, that the Mandan were lighter-skinned than other tribes. In this Maximilian was a notable dissenter (see p. 262). Beginning with Thompson in 1797, several accounts indicate that dark brown hair of fine texture and dark brown eyes were common among the Mandan. This was considered by Henry and others to be in contrast to other Indians whose norm was supposed to be coarse black hair and black eyes.

As early as 1804, fair-haired Mandan children were observed. These may have been mixed-breeds, since reference is made to a half-breed boy that same year.<sup>45</sup> Or they may simply have represented the partial blondism sometimes seen in young individuals of otherwise brunet races.

#### INTERPRETATION

In all probability, light skins and dark brown hair and eyes among the Mandan were pre-contact phenomena, which, before 1800, were augmented by White admixture. It is very doubtful, however, that the light skin color of the Mandan was unique among Western tribes. In fact, Matthews' Mandan informant stated that the Hidatsa and Crow were lighter-skinned than the Mandan themselves (p. 263). Thompson, who found the Mandan ". . . as fair as our french canadians" (p. 260), made similar remarks about the light skin color of the Cree, Inspaelis (Salish), and Piegan. Of the last he said,

Their color is something like that of a Spaniard from the south of Spain, and this something like that of the French from the south of France, and this comparison is drawn from seeing them [French Canadians and Piegan] while bathing together.<sup>46</sup>

Alexander Henry also remarked that the Piegan were "rather swarthy,

44 Garrand, 1927, p. 117.

45 Coues, 1893, p. 185.

46 Tyrrell, 1916, p. 233.

although they frequently have a fair skin and grey eyes, with light hair."<sup>47</sup> Reynolds observed the Crow to be lighter than the Sioux,

. . . many of the mountain band being sallow and hardly a shade darker than Whites who undergo similar exposure. This fact was so marked that the first seen were supposed to be half-breeds, but we were assured that they were of pure Indian descent.<sup>48</sup>

Larocque stated, regarding the Crow,

Such of them as do not make practice of exposing themselves naked to the sun, have a skin nearly as white as that of white people. Those parts which the women keep concealed are likewise white, but their face, breast and arms and shoulders are burnt to the common copper colour of the Indians by the scorching rays of the sun. Most of those Indians as they do not so often go naked, are generally of a fairer skin than most of the other tribes with which I am acquainted. It is my opinion that the N.W. Americans in general were they brought up in the manner that we are, and their bodies kept from the burning heat of the sun, would in a few generations be as white as Europeans.<sup>49</sup>

Lewis and Clark stated that the Sioux and Lemhi Shoshone were darker than the Mandan and Hidatsa.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to indicating other light-skinned tribes in the northern Plains and adjacent areas, these reports suggest considerable differences in this respect from tribe to tribe. Possibly there was a rough south-north regression in skin color for the northern Plains, just as there appears to be in the Southwest.<sup>51</sup> Thus it may be significant that the 18th and 19th century travelers most struck by the light skin color of the Mandan were those who ascended the Missouri, passing through presumably darker Indians of the lower Missouri. In this group of travelers, d'Eglise, Lewis and Clark, and Catlin would figure. On the other hand, men like Thompson and Henry who travelled overland from the Assiniboine River posts apparently found the Mandan little or no lighter than the Cree and Assiniboine with whom they were familiar.

Whether there was a south-to-north decrease in skin pigmentation for the northern Plains tribes, we shall probably never know. At any rate, the inter-tribal range in this respect was probably not great in comparison to metric variability.<sup>52</sup> Within each tribe, however, the individual range was undoubtedly quite wide. On

47 Coues, 1897, pp. 524-525.

48 Matthews, 1877, p. 338.

49 Larocque, 1910, p. 59.

50 Coues, 1893, p. 564.

51 Gabel, 1939, p. 44.

52 Hooton, 1937, pp. 158-162.



this point we have Seltzer's careful observations on Zuñi men.<sup>53</sup> The following percentages were obtained for unexposed skin color:

Brunet . . . . .	(von Luschan 7, 8, 9) . . . . .	5.5%
Swarthy . . . . .	(von Luschan 10, 11) . . . . .	18.5
Red brown . . . . .	(von Luschan 12, 14, 16) . . . . .	48.5
Light brown . . . . .	(von Luschan 15, 17, 18) . . . . .	25.0
Yellow brown . . . . .	(von Luschan 19, 20, 6) . . . . .	0.9
Medium brown . . . . .	(von Luschan 21, 25) . . . . .	1.7

Thus about one out of four Zuñi men would be hardly any darker than most European Whites. Within the Mandan villages a similar or higher proportion of light skins could reasonably be expected. The explanation for the lighter shades of skin color lies in the presence of gene variants which must have arisen through mutation. Such mutations for light skin color would be restricted only by the selective effect of the environment. This effect would be more drastic in more southerly climates, especially among nomads receiving maximum exposure to the actinic rays of the sun. Such selections against light skin color should have been at a minimum among the Mandan, who had been earth lodge dwellers north of 45°N for a minimum of ten generations. That the effects of these selective processes could be apparent within a rather short time-span is suggested by Hrdlička's observations on the Apache. He said:

The skin in most Mescalero . . . who live in a comparatively cold region is lighter in color than in most Apache, even where there is no suspicion of blood admixture. Some of those of the younger generation who wear clothing and wash themselves regularly retain hardly more of the yellowish brown than can be found in some whites along the Mediterranean.<sup>54</sup>

Since it is unlikely that when the Apache first came into the Southwest, the lighter-skinned ones went to areas of cooler climate and the darker-skinned ones travelled to where it was hotter, the difference must be a product of environmental pressures.

In addition to selection, the protection afforded the skin by semi-sedentary life in earth lodges probably enhanced the light color of the Mandan. This diminished tanning and weathering may have tended to heighten the contrast in skin color between the Mandan and the more southerly nomadic tribes. Because of faded tanning, light skin color would be particularly noticeable during the winter, the season of the most prolonged White visits to the Mandan villages.

<sup>53</sup> Gabel, 1939, pp. 44-45.

<sup>54</sup> Hrdlička, 1908, p. 153 fn.

Just as it appears unrealistic to expect all Indian claimants of full-blooded status to have dark coppery-brown skins, so it is overly restrictive to require them to have coarse black hair and black eyes. In fact, as Seltzer has indicated, "the hair color of the North American Indian is predominantly dark brown, as contrasted with the blue-black shade of pure Mongoloids. . . ." <sup>55</sup> According to Hooton, "the common impression that American Indians have, invariably, coarse hair is almost certainly incorrect." <sup>56</sup> Among Hopi, Navaho, Papago, Yaqui, and Zuñi male series, fine hair texture was found in 68-75 percent. <sup>57</sup> Eye color of North American Indians ranges from medium to very dark brown, but strictly speaking is never black. <sup>58</sup> In the light of all this, there does not seem to be anything non-Indian about the appearance of those Mandan who were not the results of recent White admixture.

On the other hand, an explanation in terms of mixture with a handful of Europeans centuries earlier is more difficult. Any estimate of prehistoric Mandan population is sheer guess-work, but it is reasonable to assume that the European Whites were far outnumbered. From a genetic standpoint, this numerical inferiority would be hard to overcome, even if the Europeans combined unusual longevity with great procreative abilities. To sustain the more lightly pigmented qualities of the resulting mixed offspring for many generations would probably require a high ratio of inbreeding. Such selective mating of a mixed minority within a larger Indian group is wholly without precedent in Indian history. Failing selective mating of this sort, the retention of recognizably European physical characters within the Mandan population would be somewhat more likely if that population were an almost exclusively inbreeding group. Nothing is known about the breeding habits of the prehistoric Mandan, but within the historic period there are indications of significant genetic interchanges with neighboring tribes. This sort of outbreeding would tend to further disperse any conceivably remaining concentration of European genes. All these probabilities weigh heavily against the chances of a few Europeans making a genetic impression still visible after more than 400 years upon an Indian group with a maximum estimated population of 8,000-15,000 in 1738, and possibly an even greater number in earlier times. <sup>59</sup>

Now if European genes are used to explain the lighter pigmentation of the Mandan, the light skin color reported for the Hidatsa, Crow, Piegan, Cree, and

<sup>55</sup> Dr Carl Seltzer, as quoted by Hooton, 1937.

<sup>56</sup> Hooton, 1937, p. 159.

<sup>57</sup> Gabel, 1939, p. 47.

<sup>58</sup> Hooton, 1937, p. 159.

<sup>59</sup> Will and Hecker, 1944, p. 56, believe that "it was during this middle period that the Mandan reached their greatest numbers and strength as a nation. . . ."

Inspaelis (see p. 265) should logically be interpreted the same way. The Menominee of Green Bay should also be explained this way, since Keating, who saw them in about 1823, said, "They are of a lighter colour than their neighbors and are therefore called the White Indians."<sup>60</sup> But this logical extension of the European gene theory would carry with it such a tremendous dispersion of the original "White" genes that their phenotypic expression over a large area of the West would certainly be almost nil.

Archaeology can do very little to confirm or negate the speculations as to how pre-Columbian Europeans could have made contact with the Mandan. There is no incontestable evidence as to the location of the Mandan prior to the Middle period sites. Of these the Huff site has yielded tree-ring dates, which range from 1485-1543.<sup>61</sup> The identification of the so-called Archaic period sites as actually Mandan is by no means clear, due to the small amount of excavation in the area and the consequent reliance on surface collections. This leaves us in ignorance of when the Mandan arrived on the Missouri River, as well as to how they got there.

On cultural grounds, the well developed horticultural existence of the Mandan need not be explained in terms of European technology. Historic Mandan culture is now sufficiently understood that it presents no problems which cannot be solved in their aboriginal setting. The well developed agriculture and domestic arts of the Mandan were by no means unusual for North America and can perhaps be attributed to their probable Eastern Woodlands origin. The earth lodge and fortified village were widespread in North America and bear only the most general resemblance to northern European forms of the Middle Ages. The self-torture of the wide-spread Sun Dance type practiced by the Mandan is totally different in form and concept from the flagellant practices of Europe in the Middle Ages. The Mandan legend about the White culture hero who came out of the West in a canoe can be essentially duplicated in many Indian tribes throughout the Americas. The same is true of the Mandan traditions allegedly resembling Biblical accounts, such as Noah's Ark and the Deluge, and Samson, as even Catlin admitted.<sup>62</sup>

#### SUMMARY

At the present time, the racially mixed status of the few living Mandan and the paucity of identifiably Mandan skeletal material preclude a first-hand investigation of the blondism and other European characters attributed to them. And the 18th and 19th century eye-witness reports on this subject lack detail and sometimes

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60 Keating, 1824, pp. 174-175.

61 Will, 1946, p. 13.

62 Catlin, 1841, p. 35.

accuracy. Some of them may have been colored by the exaggerated stories of White civilized Indians that were then current, or biased by romantic appeal of Welsh Indian and other theories. In addition, the results of the White admixture which probably began before 1850 have been interpreted in several reports as aboriginal peculiarities. Finally, the unusual amount of premature greying of the hair was confused with blondism on more than one occasion.

An analysis of these 18th and 19th century reports indicates that some of the presumptively unmixed Mandan were at least as light-skinned as darker Europeans; dark brown rather than black hair and eyes, and fine rather than coarse hair texture, were frequent. Light skin color was reported among other northern tribes as well. Careful modern studies indicate that dark brown hair and eyes, and fine hair texture are indeed most characteristic of North American Indians. Indeed, Mandan life in earth lodges north of 45°N would not only tend to reduce selection against light skin color, but would also result in less weathering of the skin than among nomadic tribes. This difference would be especially noticeable in the winter, which was the season of extended observation by Whites in the Mandan villages.

The alternative explanation involving the pre-Columbian introduction and subsequent persistence of European genes for blondism is hardly tenable. It must assume, first of all, extraordinary procreative abilities for a handful of Europeans, and over 400 years of inbreeding on the part of the mixed European-Mandan group. Difficult as it may be to explain the light pigmentation of some of the Mandan by old admixture with Europeans, it seems impossible to use the same explanation for the other allegedly light-skinned Indian tribes of North America. In addition, the whereabouts of the Mandan prior to the late 15th century are not definitely known, so that the chances of contact between them and any wandering Europeans cannot be adequately appraised. Also, enough is known about Plains Indians so that the high cultural development of the Mandan need not be explained as a grafting from European technology of the Middle Ages.

In conclusion, this review indicates that the blondism and other non-Indian characteristics reported for the Mandan of the 18th and early 19th centuries are much more plausibly explained by intertribal and individual variability in pigmentation and facial features, augmented by recent White admixture, than by pre-Columbian miscegenation with European exploring parties.

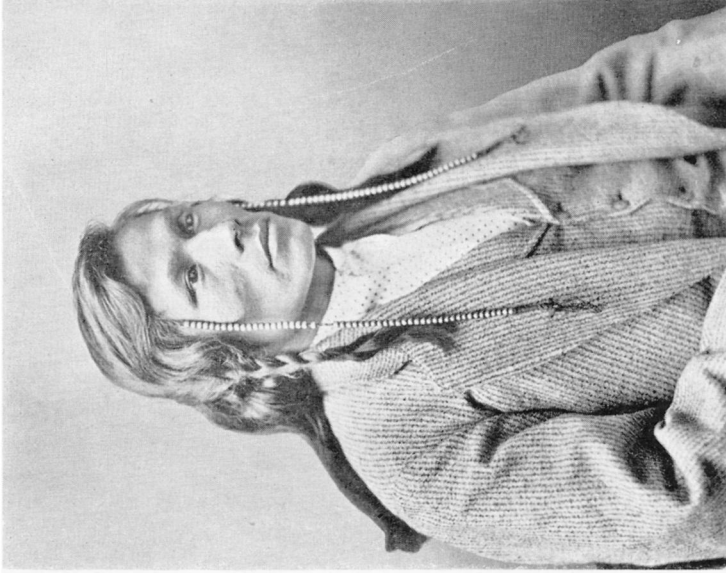
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Lance, a head soldier of the Mandan, born 1833-36. Photograph taken in 1874. Appearance gives impression of slight White admixture. (From Bureau of American Ethnology archives.)



Running Face, son of Chief Red Corn, a Mandan born in 1851. Photograph taken in 1874. Has appearance of being unmixed. (From Bureau of American Ethnology archives.)

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