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# The NORTH WEST COMPANY

## PEDLARS EXTRAORDINARY

W. L. MORTON

THAT THE North American fur trade was essentially a commercial marriage of primitive ways and needs to the more advanced techniques and demands of European and Chinese markets is one of those truths so evident and general that they could scarcely be proved if there were need. Similarly, the North West Company before 1821 was an extraordinarily successful union of the primitive culture of the forest Indian tribes with the sophisticated civilization of Western Europe. This paper tries to point the way toward a study of the company's effective merger of commerce and culture; it attempts to be a critical essay rather than a piece of research.<sup>1</sup>

Let us begin by noting that the North American Indian with whom the fur trade was conducted was an inland forest dweller.

Unlike the Eskimo and the European, he neither lived by nor used the sea. Trade between him and the transoceanic European, accordingly, turned upon either the Indian going to the shore or the European going inland.

The earliest barter was of course entirely coastal, even when separated from fishing voyages and pursued as a distinct undertaking. The scattered references we possess to the fur trade of the sixteenth century all allude to trade on the coast, whether casual or at a seaside rendezvous. The first historically known rendezvous was Tadoussac on the Gulf of St. Lawrence; Quebec, Trois Rivières, and Montreal were each in turn meant to be the same, but the trade was carried steadily inland by the happy accident of the great sea entry of the St. Lawrence River. A similar entry was Hudson Bay, and a far more successful example of the coastal trade was that pursued by the Hudson's Bay Company from 1669 to 1774, until the competition of the trade from Canada forced the English company also to begin trading inland.

The obvious commercial advantage to Europeans of the coastal trade was that it placed on the Indians the cost of trans-

<sup>1</sup> The history of the North West Company has now been reconstructed with sufficient completeness both to establish the character of the company as a business organization and to explain its role in the North American fur trade. This has been done despite the lack of documentary evidence for most of its business affairs. The historical task has been carried so far chiefly by two recent and massive works: Paul Chrisler Phillips, *The Fur Trade* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961); and E. E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company 1670-1870* (London, 1958, 1959).

porting furs to the seaside and goods inland. More significant to the theme of this paper is that for the Europeans it avoided the necessity of mastering the techniques and manners of Indian travel and life. Coastal trade provided a meeting place for commercial barter with a minimum of cultural exchange, whereas the inland trade could be carried on only by Indian means. The Europeans had to become "Indianized," and cultural exchange was greatly increased. The French traders led in this process, and the North West Company, as the heir of the Frenchmen, became the principal representative of European commerce and culture in the inland fur trade.

BEFORE the rise and character of the company are discussed, it is necessary to examine the part played by one of the two partners in the fur trade—the primitive or Indian. The Indians of the northern forest zone were a seminomadic people who lived by food gathering: hunting, fishing, and picking fruits in season. Tribes like the Montagnais and the Cree, who depended purely on hunting and fishing, were more strictly speaking nomadic. Many tribes, however—notably the Iroquoian—had acquired the culture of Indian corn; some were harvesters of wild rice; and some tapped the hard maple for sugar.<sup>2</sup> The need to return to or remain by the cornfields, the rice lakes, and the sugar bushes explains why they are termed seminomadic, and even this is perhaps not to be applied to tribes like the Hurons or the Onondaga, whose lands were rich in corn. But these people had a "shifting" agriculture, and almost no Indian tribe was fully and finally committed to one spot—"settled" in the European sense of the word.

Even with supplements like corn, wild rice, and maple sugar, most Indians relied in the main on hunting and fishing for their food. Both meant considerable movement, dispersal in the winter to the hunting grounds, and congregation at the fishing runs and the fields and berry patches in

summer.<sup>3</sup> On the hunt the Indian relied almost wholly on deer hide and beaver robes for his clothing. Thus his culture possessed two necessities of the fur trade: the means to live on the country as it was, and furs themselves.

Commerce with the whites might improve the means of hunting and of fishing. Such items as the gun, the iron hatchet, and the steel trap increased the Indian's efficiency, but his own culture had long provided the essential tools, such as the bow and arrow, the stone ax, and the deadfall—plus a forest craft not easily learned, let alone improved upon. To live in the forest it was imperative to be able to move, both as a lone hunter and in bands. This the Indian could do with a skill which the European was to surpass only by the aid of the mechanical inventions of the nineteenth century. The Indian possessed the canoe in its most exquisite form—the birchbark. This product of the northern forest and the remarkable craft of canoe building was in fact to be the prime mover of the Canadian fur trade. It was used from the first by the Indian to bring furs to the coastal rendezvous, and by the European to penetrate inland. Fragile it was, but it possessed the inestimable advantage that it could be repaired on the spot, given a readily available supply of birch bark, spruce root, and spruce gum.

The canoe gave to the Indian a summer range of hundreds—even thousands—of miles. No such travel was possible in winter, but the Indian culture did provide means

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<sup>2</sup> Maple sugar is rarely taken into account by fur trade historians; yet note the frequent references in Elliott Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson, 1799–1814*, 1:4, 25, 30, 101, 112, 122, 130, 162, 170, 192, 196, 211, 244, 259, 275, 281; 2:492, 629, 681 (New York, 1897); and in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, 32, 37, 44, 165, 234, 236, 270, 273 (St. Paul, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> The necessity for this movement is brought out with painful clarity in Edwin James, ed., *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (Minneapolis, 1956). On the importance of fruit, see, for example, Henry, in Coues, ed., *New Light on the . . . Greater Northwest*, 2:485.

for the movement of men and goods necessary to hunting and following trap lines. Snowshoes and moccasins made walking possible over the deep, soft snow of the northern woods, and the toboggan enabled the hunter to transport his game and furs. These two means of movement were as indispensable to the fur trapping of the winter as the canoe was to the fur trade of the summer.

THUS there were in the primitive economy all but two of the elements needed to sustain the fur trade. These two—market demand and capital to finance a year's operation of fur collection, transport, and sale—Europeans were to supply, along with the management that was to bring all together in a functioning system. But it was not only tools and techniques that the

Indian culture supplied to the trade. Most important of all was manpower.<sup>4</sup> The aboriginal Indian was the first hunter and trapper, the first canoeman and snowshoer, and the white trapper and voyageur were his pupils. In the lands that became the United States the latter largely supplanted him as trappers and boatmen, but in the Canadian forests the local Indian has remained the principal fur-taker down to the present. The fur trader relied not only on local hunters; he sometimes persuaded whole bands to move with him or used Indians like the eastern Iroquois, who found regular employment in following the trade.<sup>5</sup>

The work of the Indian hunter and trapper was augmented by that of the Indian woman, preparer of food, carrier of burdens, curer of furs, and sewer of shirts, leggings, and moccasins. These tasks, of course, were exclusively the squaw's work, such being the rigid division of labor between the sexes in the Indian culture. It was therefore practically impossible to live off the country and carry on the fur trade without the assistance of Indian women. It is not necessary to mention their additional role as mothers of new manpower, but it is perhaps fitting to

<sup>4</sup> This is one of those self-evident facts which, if not made explicit, is sometimes seriously neglected. The importance of Indian manpower was drawn to my attention by Mr. Jan Kupp and will be developed by him in his doctoral dissertation for the department of history, University of Manitoba.

<sup>5</sup> See Henry, in Coues, ed., *New Light on the . . . Greater Northwest*, 1:44-77; 2:452; Richard Glover, ed., *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812*, 229 (Toronto, 1962).

### *"En Route to the Trading Post"*



recall the remarkable economy with which they performed all these necessary functions. As the Chipewyan chief, Matonabee, pointed out in man-to-man fashion to Samuel Hearne, "Women were made for labour; one of them can carry, or haul, as much as two men can do. . . . the very licking of their fingers in scarce times, is sufficient for their subsistence. . . . [and they] keep us warm at night."<sup>6</sup>

Even this does not quite exhaust the services of the Indian woman to the fur trade. As in all commerce, there was a considerable element of diplomacy, which was necessary to soothe tribal rivalries and prevent tribal wars, and as in all diplomacy, women had a part to play. From the day of Pocahontas on, there are indications that women sometimes eased diplomatic relations between Indian and European. Certainly, as astute traders noted from time to time, marriage to a chief's daughter might well be good for business, and the kinship marriage conferred greatly eased the difficulty of persuading Indians to remain loyal to those who financed their hunt.

Children born of such unions came to be a significant and useful group in the fur trade. Not European, not Indian, although closer as children of the wilderness to the Indian way of life, the métis, or mixed-bloods, came to make up a large part of the work force and were a striking example of the Indianization of the European in the fur trade. They were in their own persons — not always happily — the very realization of that union of the primitive and the sophisticated that was the fur trade as practiced by the North West Company.

In the Canadian fur trade, therefore, the only good Indian was not a dead one; he was, on the contrary, a live one who would follow his trap line. From this need for the Indian as a fur-gatherer arose the traders' interest in Indian population and the attempts to estimate it, as in the census of the Northwest recorded by Alexander Henry the Younger.<sup>7</sup> The Indian band had its own hunting grounds, a territory on the wildlife

of which it could live by hunting, aided with such other food as could be grown or gathered. Hunting grounds were vague areas, changed by war or epidemic disease, or by deliberate migration, such as that of the Chippewa from north of Lake Huron westward to the Lake of the Woods and the Red River country. In exploring for new fur country it was therefore necessary to know not only the wildlife, food resources, and waterways; equally important were the number, disposition, and needs of the people. It was never enough that there should be beavers and martens; there must also be Indians from whom to buy food and purchase furs.

SOLEMNLY TO discuss the historic Indian in the language of a modern labor gazette is, of course, rather quaint. The Indian was a happily primitive person. He had not been made a laborer, a hand, or a businessman of punctual habits and tense drive by centuries of disciplined civilization. He suffered many miseries, but unemployment and gastric ulcers were not among them. He did only what was necessary to keep himself alive. It was exceedingly difficult to add to his wants, except by replacing a known article by a superior one of a like kind: a bow by a gun, a birch-bark vessel by a brass one, or a moose hide by a woolen blanket. Only liquor — and for the Plains Indian, the horse — created a want hitherto unknown and a means of inducing him to trap beyond the need to obtain the essentials of his simple life. Liquor, however, could not be used merely as a commodity, because drunken Indians were likely to become murderous and reduce their scant numbers at an alarming rate. Accordingly, the skilled trader used it as a treat, a loss leader, an inducement given freely to win the Indian to work.

To what degree the Indian ever under-

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in J. B. Tyrrell, ed., *Hearne: A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean*, 102 (Toronto, 1911).

<sup>7</sup> See Henry, in Coues, ed., *New Light on the . . . Greater Northwest*, 1:282; 2:516, 522, 530.

stood or adopted European commercial and economic concepts of exchange is open to question. He was of course quite as intelligent a being as the European trader and had a very keen sense of how the primary producer benefited from the rivalry of competing buyers and of how he suffered from monopoly. But this arose from practical observation, not from economic reasoning. His culture gave exchange another meaning than the commercial one. His nomad's sense of hospitality to the stranger, his tribal sense of obligation to kindred, led him to give freely what others needed and to expect to receive freely in return. To him trade was reciprocity in giving, not mutual benefit in exchange.<sup>8</sup>

The Indian and even the métis lacked the commercial sense. He did not precisely understand credit or price changes, and he felt little obligation to pay debts. He did, however, acknowledge the obligation to give to those who had given to him, a sense that had to be kept alive by constant care lest the image of the trader who had given credit should fade in the presence of a rival who would offer new presents for the furs

that should have gone to settle the accounts of his competitor.

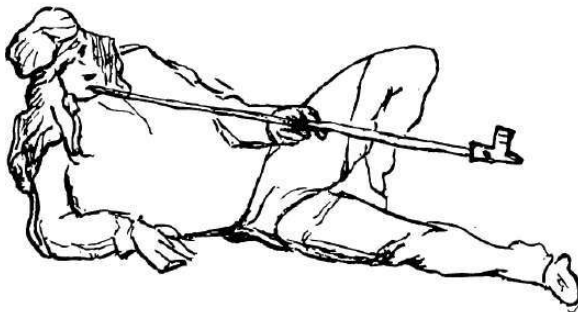
Similarly, the Indian quite lacked any sense of the need to work for the morrow or to grow in riches. He met each day's needs if he could; if not, he starved, enduring privation with singular equanimity. Except for some individuals, he was as unsatisfactory a workman as he was a producer. How unsatisfactory he could be to a well-brought-up young Scot or Yankee can be seen on page after page in the journals of the younger Alexander Henry or of Daniel Harmon.<sup>9</sup> In this the Indian was the product of his total environment. His being so only increases the significance of the skills, endurance, and courage of the fur trader who had to be everything from doctor to policeman, while filling his canoes as well. The greatest accomplishment of such men was the North West Company, a mighty business organization that existed by the capacity of its wintering partners to induce the Indian to trap regularly.

It was this ability of the North West Company to use the manpower and the skills of

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of these attitudes, see E. E. Rich, "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation Among the Indians of North America," in *Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, 26:35-53 (February, 1960). Mr. Rich emphasizes the Indian's lack of a "sense of property" rather than a lack of a commercial sense.

<sup>9</sup> See W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in the Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1852*, lxxv (Toronto, 1957).

*Métis (below) and voyageur, as  
sketched by Frank B. Mayer in 1851*





primitive culture that made it at its height the greatest of all Canadian—perhaps of all—fur trading companies. Its ultimate failure was as a business concern, not as a fur-gathering organization. Probably the most significant commentary on its efficiency is the fact that between 1774 and the union of 1821 the Hudson's Bay Company adopted all of its field techniques except the use of the canoe.

THE SUCCESS of the North West Company stemmed in large part from adopting and developing the modes and personnel of the French fur trade as it existed before and in the years just after 1760. Personifying French skill in the trade were the voyageurs, or canoemen. Under the system of "engagement" young men from the Quebec parishes (usually bound for three-year terms) were employed and trained as voyageurs, then returned to the land and later re-engaged, or left as "freemen" in the Northwest. Some of the latter were employed at the wilderness posts in such capacities as smiths, carpenters, canoe builders, or ax men. Others were used as traders *en derouine*—that is, were sent to drum up business with the Indians and to collect debts in the form of furs. Still others, if literate, might rise from clerks to be "bourgeois." The bourgeois was the trader who had invested his skill, his courage, and (if he had any) his money. He was responsible for the returns from the district to which he had been assigned.<sup>10</sup>

The voyageurs remained both the symbol and mainstay of the Canadian fur trade, but as traders the French generally proved too individualistic, too much devoted to small and limited enterprises, and too poor at business to compete with their Yankee or Scottish rivals.<sup>11</sup> It may well have been this, rather than lack of access to capital, which explains the gradual replacement of the French-Canadian bourgeois by Scottish, English, and American traders after 1760.

The Nor'Westers also adopted the canoe, as developed by the French in the *cânot de maître* and the *cânot du nord*, and the cus-

tom of provisioning the brigades with dried corn and grease to Grand Portage. Also taken over was the use of the fur post in all its variations from a log shack for a winter's occupation to the stockaded fort with its component dwelling houses, stores, and shops. (The Hudson's Bay Company used forts also, but those on the shores of the bay were English structures built by naval carpenters, not wilderness stockades.) Incorporated, too, as the name indicates, was the *regale* or treat—liquor given the Indian in the spirit of nomadic good fellowship to establish cordial relations and encourage the hunter to trap for his friends.

The *regale* was only a symbol of the French genius for accepting the Indian with all his casualness, his moodiness, his sensitivity, his insistence that the door always be open to him, his expectation that if in need he would be given what he required. In these respects the Nor'Westers, especially the Scots, were apt pupils of the French, and often succeeded where the Englishmen and the Orkney men in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company failed, through private reserve or restraints imposed by the organization. (It is of course to be noted also that the detachment of the Bay men usually preserved them from involvement in the passions, feuds, and trickery of Indian life and often was rewarded in the long run by a reputation for honesty and fair dealing.)

Another North West inheritance from the French were the *métis*, with all that their existence implied. The rough judgment that on balance the *métis* added to the strength and success of the North West Company is probably defensible. They were an impor-

<sup>10</sup> How much of this was actually French practice, and how much developed from French practice it is difficult to state in our want of detailed knowledge of the organization of the French fur trade. There is a revealing though brief description of the resumption of activity by French traders after 1760 in a forthcoming volume by Hilda Neatby of the University of Saskatchewan, to be published under the title "Quebec: The Revolutionary Age," as one of the *Canadian Centenary Series*.

<sup>11</sup> See David Thompson's comments on this point in Glover, ed., *Thompson's Narrative*, 41.

tant part of the labor force of the Canadian fur trade, particularly in their role as buffalo hunters during the company's last years. By 1816, the year of the affair at Seven Oaks, they probably held the fate of the Northwest in their hands. One of the first needs of the united company was to conciliate them and to employ them as dependents of the fur trade and as defenders against the Sioux.<sup>12</sup>

ALL THESE inherited and borrowed techniques for dealing with the wilderness were combined by the shrewd Nor'Westers with a superior business organization. Connections with English business houses gave the Canadians access to higher quality trade goods and better credit than their French counterparts had secured. When the entrepôt for much of the American fur trade, formerly centered at Albany and New York, was shifted to Montreal, the size and vigor of the business was increased proportionately. The result was a great strengthening of the trade in capital and managerial ability and also an extraordinary concentration of resources. Thus for nearly three decades the North American fur trade, both that of the southwest (the American Northwest) and that of the Canadian Northwest, was centered in Montreal.

The growth of the company from partnership to partnership has been explained in terms of the need to combine and to marshal the resources and bear the costs of deeper penetration into the Northwest.<sup>13</sup> This was indeed an important reason for "pooling" resources. It seems not, however, to be the

whole explanation of what occurred. There was in the very nature of the fur trade an inherent need of monopoly because of its seasonal character, its dependence on the seeming whims of a primitive and uncommercial people, the easy depletion of the numbers of fur-bearing animals by hunting or disease, and the difficulty of carrying the loss of a year's outfit. There were probably also reasons of management in the field, involving the control and distribution of goods, the giving of credit, and the collection of furs.<sup>14</sup> Competition was not the life of the fur trade, but its death.

However that may be, the very name North West Company points to the subsequent political division of the fur country of central North America after the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. More and more there was a southwest and a northwest fur trade from Montreal. After the final implementation of Jay's Treaty in 1795 the southwest trade was increasingly surrendered to Americans. The North West Company grew in importance to the fur trade of Montreal, and the Canadian trade was pressed back upon the uninhabitable and permanently primitive wilderness of the Canadian Shield and the northern forest.

The gradual forcing of the Canadian fur trade toward the northwest intensified the need for large-scale organization. Supply bases were necessary, and with the beginning of the new century the posts on the Red River, the Assiniboine, and the Saskatchewan, along the line where the northern forest and the plains merged in the long grass and the park belt country, became more and more supply centers and less and less fur posts. The buffalo hunt and the métis buffalo hunter began to emerge as an institution and a type. Their function was to obtain from the plains the dried meat and pemmican that would provision the Saskatchewan and Athabasca brigades in the long reaches from Bas de la Rivière on Lake Winnipeg to the Methy Portage into the Athabasca country.

In these developments lay the beginning

<sup>12</sup> This aspect of the fur trade is discussed in Margaret Macleod and W. L. Morton, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown: Warden of the Plains of Red River* (Toronto, 1963).

<sup>13</sup> This thesis has been given its classic statement by Harold A. Innis in *The Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1930).

<sup>14</sup> See Matthew Cocking's comment on the need to prevent "Confusion of Goods" among separate traders in one place, in W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 45 (Toronto, 1934); also Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal . . . to the Frozen and Pacific Ocean*, 18 (Toronto, 1927).

of strain on the loose-jointed organization of the company, particularly in the relations between "wintering" and Montreal partners. In them lay the need to shorten the continental haul of furs to Montreal, either by shifting the entrepôt from Montreal to Hudson Bay, or by seeking a western outlet on the Pacific. In them also lay an ever increasing dependence on the labor of the Indians and the métis, a dependence that required the carrying of a rapidly growing number of métis families.

THE GREATER the strain, the greater was the need for monopoly and the need at last to take seriously the competition of the much smaller and less effective but enduring, stable, and slowly learning Hudson's Bay Company. The longer the canoe haul and the larger the labor force, the greater was the necessity of provisions from Red River. The clash between the two remaining fur organizations of the Northwest would seem to have been inevitable even had it not been precipitated by two external factors, namely, the War of 1812 and the Earl of Selkirk's passion for colonization.

Both these factors put pressure on the North West Company at tender and vital points: the main supply area at Detroit-Michilimackinac, from which came corn for the Montreal canoe brigades; and the Red River, from which came pemmican for the canoes bound for the far Northwest. The Astor venture on the Pacific Coast was regarded by Canadians as part of the War of 1812, in that it challenged the formation of a western outlet and supply base at the mouth of the Columbia River.

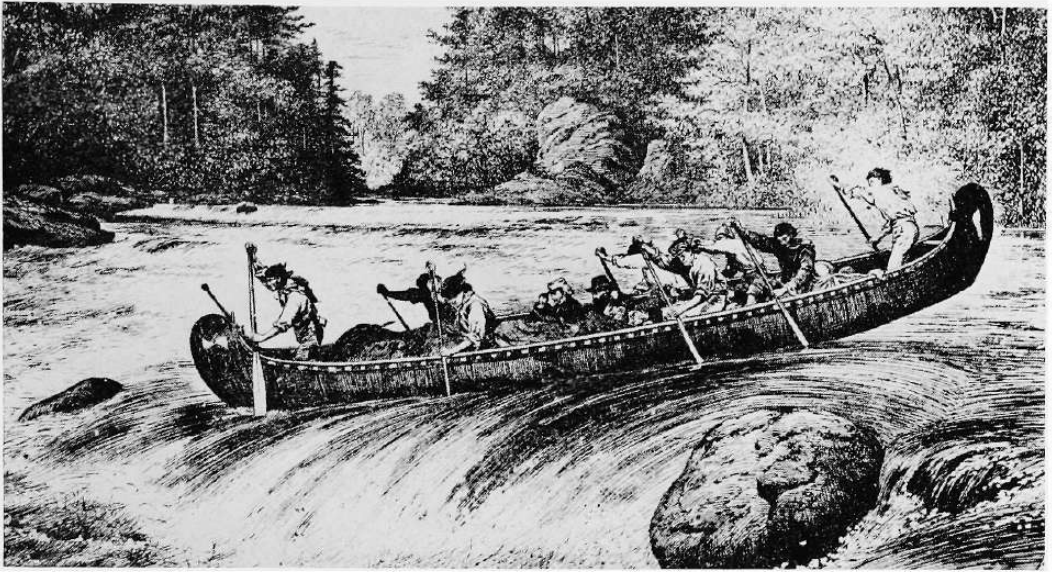
Because of early British military successes, the alliance with the Indians, and the isolation of the Astorians, the War of 1812 was a means of alleviating the pressures on the Montreal and Columbia routes. There remained the pemmican base at Red River. As the Nor'Westers saw it, the character and the seriousness of Selkirk's part in the new aggressiveness of the Hudson's Bay Company might not by themselves have led to a

clash had it not coincided with the War of 1812. Nor'Westers had, after all, dealt successfully with competition before by cultivating the loyalty of their Indian and métis hunters with liquor and blandishments, and by the use of their bullies (*batailleurs*) to harass competitors. Despite their suspicion of Selkirk's purposes from the first, the Nor'Westers behaved with exemplary patience from 1811 to 1813. But by the spring of 1814, under the influence of the war temper, they had come to think strategically and to act drastically. By the spring of 1815 they knew they had lost the territorial gains of the war to the United States in Michigan and perhaps in the Columbia Valley. In the winter of 1814-15, because of the action of Miles Macdonnell, governor of Assiniboia, in first prohibiting and then limiting the export of pemmican from Red River, they became convinced that Selkirk's colony was an immediate and intolerable threat to the supplying of their northwestern posts and brigades. They resolved, therefore, to remove or destroy the colony. Thus the return of peace elsewhere saw the beginning of "war" on the Red River.

The struggle on the Red River in 1815 and 1816, and in the law courts of Canada from 1817 to 1821, reveals little that is new about the North West Company. It fought with all the resources it could command — commercial, primitive, and legal — against a rival who used all these in return and added to them a small army of mercenaries hired after their discharge from service in the late war. In every field the company at least held its own, and beyond doubt deserved to. It could not, however, overcome the inherent weaknesses of its own loose organization, of dependence on a labor force that was constantly growing in size and unruliness, and of the high costs of its extended transportation routes. The aroused Hudson's Bay Company, still a David to the North West Company's Goliath, needed only to keep on fighting to have the giant collapse of his own weight.

The final union of the rivals was at once





*A fur trade canoe on the Mattawa River, Ontario, pictured by Frances Hopkins*

a victory and a defeat for each. The Hudson's Bay Company was victorious in that its supply route by the bay triumphed over that by the St. Lawrence as did its charter over the partnership of the North West Company. It was defeated in that it won only when it had adopted in large part the techniques and methods of its rivals inland. The North West Company lost its name and legal entity, but not before it had forced on its great competitor the mode of operation and the labor force which it had developed and by which it had flourished. The united company was very much the old North West Company operating out of Hudson Bay.

THE NORTH WEST COMPANY was the first successful combination of European capital and business enterprise with Indian skills. As such, it holds a special place in the history of the North American fur trade and in the history of Canada. Its distinctive character arose from the fact that it came to grips with the unique conditions prevailing in Canada — conditions of climate, distance, and resources, which prevent a large proportion of the country's area from sustaining a pattern of economic and social life like that of Europe or the United States.

The company faced for the first time the fundamental question of how to maintain a western-oriented society in a severely northern, largely uninhabitable land. For much of Canada can be exploited only by extremes: by a primitive culture like that of the Eskimo, skilled in the special techniques of survival and content with merely maintaining life for a tiny population; or by a civilization with a technology so highly developed that it can overcome almost any obstacle of environment if the necessary expenditure is justified on grounds of private profit or state policy.

The effort to deal with this permanent northern frontier makes Canada what it is, and the influence of the effort can be traced all through Canadian history and contemporary society, most obviously in the comparative lack of both people and wealth in a country territorially so vast. The successful solution reached by the North West Company would seem to point toward the two channels through which a sophisticated culture and economy may exploit the North to its own best advantage and with the least detriment to the primitive culture of the people dwelling there. These channels are private monopoly or state development.



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