The Beaver

WINTER 1965

Eskimo trapper with Arctic Fox skins.

THIS IS THE ARCTIC– Canada's newest frontier served now, as in the past, by the men of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Hudson's Bay Company

INCORPORATED 2ND MAY 1670

The Beaver

MAGAZINE OF THE NORTH

Editor: Malvina Bolus

WINTER 1965
OUTFIT 296
$2 A YEAR

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COVER
The young Eskimo mother treated her little son with such fond tendernss.
Photo by Michael Marton

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Iroquois warrior (story page 4) drawn in 1787 by J. Grasset de St Sauveur.

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY

WINNIPEG 1, CANADA

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HUDSON'S BAY HOUSE

Published by The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay, known as the Hudson's Bay Company. The interests of THE BEAVER cover the territory with which the Company has been or is now associated. Annual subscription, $2; three years for $5; single copy, 50 cents. While every care will be taken of manuscripts and illustrations submitted, no liability will be assumed for loss. Authorized as second class mail, Post Office Department, Ottawa, and for payment of postage in cash. Contents copyright. Printed in Canada.

BY W. A. McKAY

Part IV - Conclusion

the story of THE CANADIAN FUR TRADE

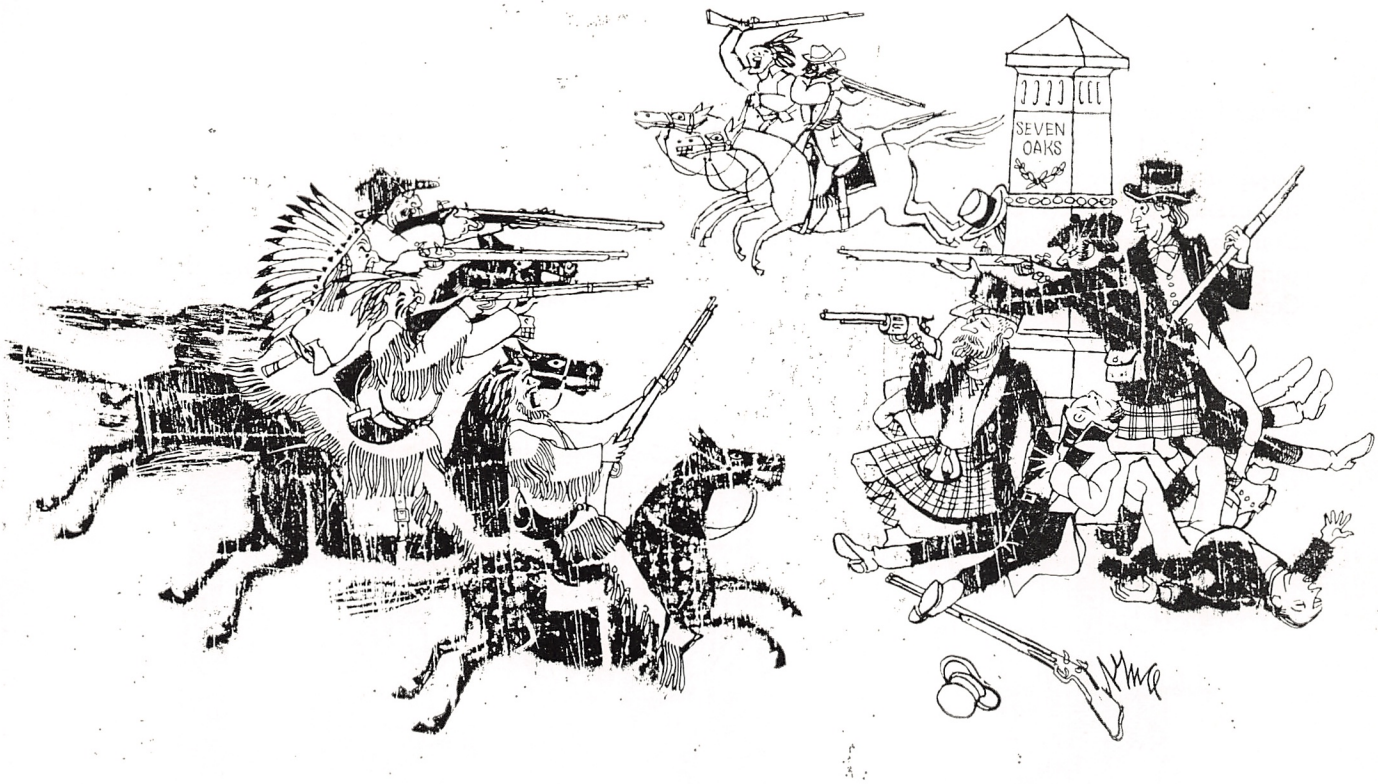
DURING THE EARLY PART of the nineteenth century the North West Company continued to exploit its fur trading empire westward beyond the mountains. In 1805 Simon Fraser, a young partner in the company, had established Fort McLeod, the first trading post west of the Rockies in what is now British Columbia. The following year he built Fort St James on Stuart Lake and Fort Fraser on Fraser Lake and having organized fur trade in the area, set out to trace the Columbia River from its source to the sea.

Fraser was unfortunate in one respect. The source of the river he started on didn't connect with the mouth of the river he was looking for. By 2nd July 1808 he had traversed the longest and least navigable river in British Columbia but it was not until he reached its mouth and took latitudinal observations of his position that he realized that he had discovered a whole new waterway and "bitterly disappointed, named it after himself". It is unfortunate that none of his companions kept a journal on this occasion. It would have been interesting to read their reactions to something like "Oops—wrong river".

The North West Company, which had a long tradition of perserverance behind it, also sent David Thompson west to explore the Columbia River. Thompson had something of a reputation as an explorer. He had worked for the Hudson's Bay Company in the survey of the Nelson and Churchill Rivers flowing to the Bay and as an employee of the North West Company had discovered the source of the Mississippi river. Since there was little to be gained by sending Thompson down the Mississippi to explore New Orleans he was sent west to explore to the mouth of the Columbia and develop fur trade. He was successful in starting out on the right river and in establishing trading posts on the Upper Columbia, but arrived at its mouth in 1811 to find John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company already established at Astoria. Here he was cordially received, but it was suggested that in future the North West Company confine its operations to the northwest rather than the southwest areas of Canada.

This was a blow to the ego of the Nor'Westers, who were not conditioned to being surrounded by anything but wilderness. With the Hudson's Bay Company in the north, increasing settlement in the east, the Pacific Ocean on the west and the American Fur Company in the south, they began to suffer the first pangs of claustrophobia. It was getting so crowded on the plains that it was becoming difficult to avoid meeting people.

When in 1811 the Hudson's Bay Company granted to Lord Selkirk for his Settlement on Red River one hundred and sixteen thousand square miles (of what is now southern Manitoba and part of the States) for farming purposes, the North West Company reasoned that if this was not the last straw to break the back of the fur trade



. . . to discourage Canadian agriculture. . .

it would not take all these farmers very long to produce it; and decided to discourage Canadian agriculture by the typically direct method of shooting the farmers. The local Indians and Métis were enthralled with this idea, since they deplored the practice of ploughing up perfectly good buffalo ranges to produce flour which could be acquired at any trading post with considerably less effort. A start was made on this project in 1816 with the shooting of the Governor and nineteen settlers at Seven Oaks (Winnipeg), but interference by Lord Selkirk and a private army of Swiss mercenaries limited this somewhat ambitious undertaking to its initial stages and since 1817 the prairies have been more or less dedicated to the production of wheat.

In 1821 the two great rival fur-trading corporations of the west were united under the name of the Hudson's Bay Company, and embarked on the era of colonization and fur trade combined which initiated settlement on the Pacific coast. At first Western District headquarters was established, to the disgust of the Pacific Fur Company, at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia river. A string of trading posts north almost to Alaska reaped a rich trade. When in 1845 it became obvious that British interests could not expect to be furthered much longer in Oregon, preparations were intensified for making a strategic removal of headquarters to a more realistic location at Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island. A Royal Grant of the island was obtained from the British Government in 1849 in addition to the existing licence for a monopoly of fur trade for everything west of the Rockies. A condition of the grant was that the Company should establish a colony within five years.

When the British Government sent Robert Blanshard out as Colonial Governor in March 1850 he found little to govern other than H B C employees, who regarded Chief Factor James Douglas, the Company superintendent, as the only person with any real authority west of Upper Canada. Blanshard quite diplomatically resigned office and James Douglas was appointed in his place, with three other H B C officers as Legislative Council. Douglas now had the dual role of Governor of the Colony and Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company. His jurisdiction was later extended to include Lieutenant-Governorship of the Queen Charlotte Islands, but this latter appointment demanded very little of his time because the inhabitants of the Queen Charlottes needed a lieutenant-governor no more than General Custer needed Sioux Indians, and Governor Douglas had only a hazy idea where the Queen Charlottes were. Douglas and his council were thus able to devote their full time to managing the affairs of the colonists. Exclusive of H B C personnel, there were about 30 of these.

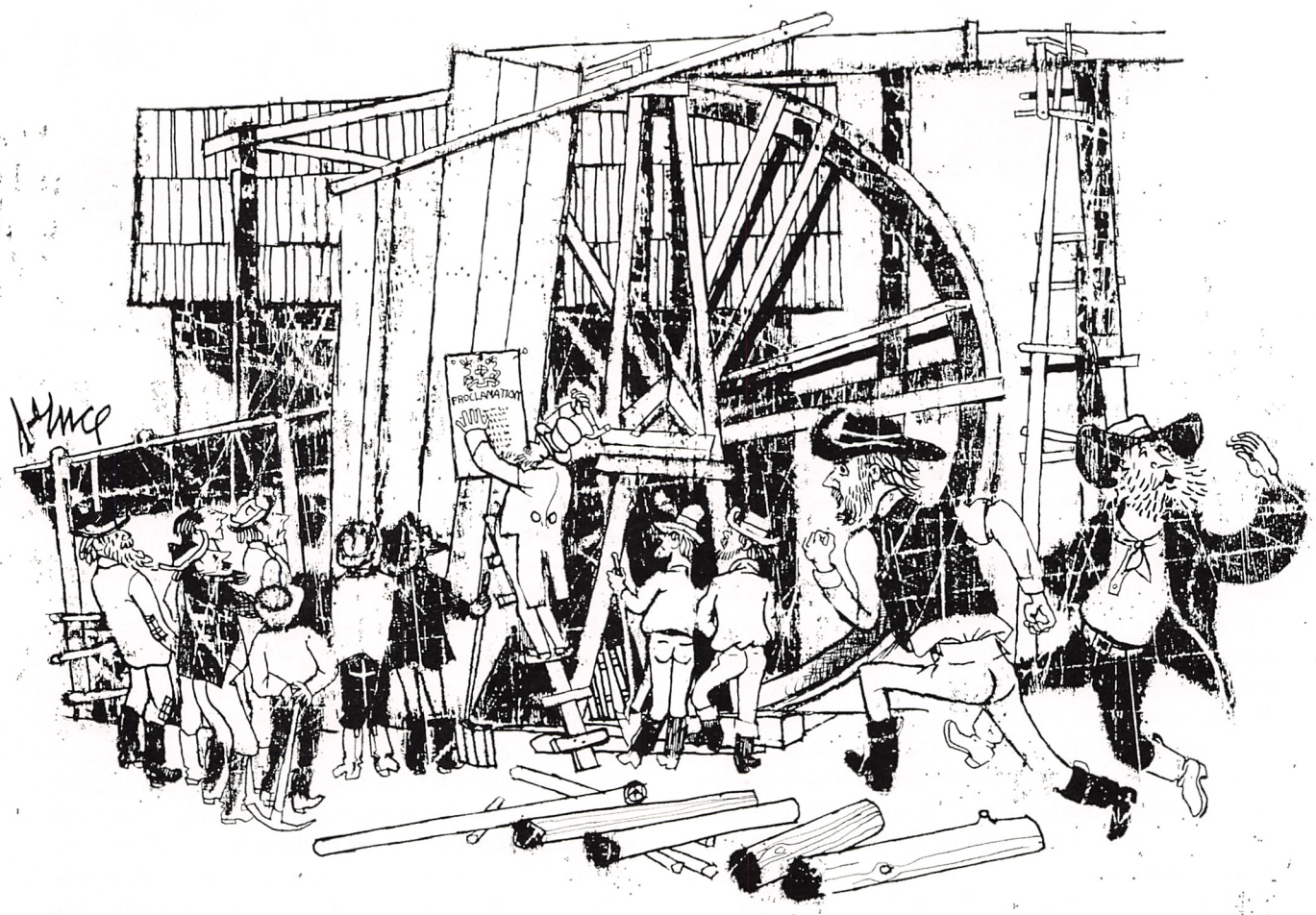
By 1852 Douglas even had the trees named after him—at least this was the way it seemed, though the botanist

David Douglas, who was no relation, really deserves the credit. When the Colonial Secretary at home wistfully enquired why more farming wasn't being carried out in the colony (apparently he had never seen a mature Douglas fir forest) the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company got the blame. Formed to operate farms in the Columbia River area the agricultural company now owned a lot of land round Victoria but while it increased its holdings it didn't increase the number of colonists very much because the farm labourers after a look at the farms went off to California to look for a fortune. The Puget Sound Company, like everything else, was a part of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Colonial affairs, however, were by no means neglected. Laws passed by the Council included laws governing labour, free-trade, a liquor act, public schools, public works and parochial affairs in general. In 1854 the Council was called on an Affair of State, when, as a result of the outbreak of the Crimean War, it became advisable to consider means of colonial defence should a Russian fleet attack the Colony.

It was suggested by the Governor that they act to "call out and arm all the men in the Colony capable of bearing arms and to levy and arm an auxiliary body of native Indians". The Council objected to this measure on the grounds that "the small number of whites in the settlement could collectively offer no effectual resistance against a powerful enemy; and it was considered dangerous to arm and drill natives, who might then become more formidable to the Colony than a foreign enemy".

As a compromise it was "Resolved, as a means of protection, to charter the Hudson's Bay Company's



. . . a series of proclamations banning mining except under a licence. . .

Propeller *Otter*, armed and manned with a force of 30 hands," (possibly the 30 settlers?) "including Captain, Officers and Engineers, and to employ her in watching over the Settlement . . .". What the Propeller *Otter* was supposed to do in the event of an attack by the Russian fleet (other than watch over the un-settlement) is not clear. Presumably she was to make the best possible use of her Propeller. In any case the Hudson's Bay Company, in addition to its other monopolies, was now in command of the Home Fleet.

Fortunately for the success of the Vancouver Island colony, fears of a Russian attack were groundless. A deal had already been made between the Hudson's Bay Company at home and the Russian American Fur Company to influence their respective Governments to keep the war away from areas of fur trade. The fact that the deal was respected by both governments indicates the extent to which these great fur-trading monopolies were able to influence affairs of state.

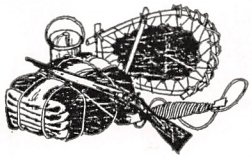
By 1858, at the insistance of the British Cabinet, a House of Assembly had been added to Governor Douglas's administrative equipment. As an illustration of how involved the Hudson's Bay Company was becoming with colonial government, the members of the Assembly included a retired officer of the Company, a retired servant, a clerk, a surveyor and an agent of the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company (née the H B C). The Speaker of the House, Dr Helmcken, was staff doctor of the Company and son-in-law of the Governor. The Collector of Customs was a retired chief trader and the Chief Justice was the Governor's brother-in-law. In order to assure that the interests of the Hudson's Bay Company would be in no way neglected, the old Legislative Council of three was still retained, and consisted of the second chief factor, the chief trader and a retired pensioner of the Company. Viewing the size of the electorate for this legislative structure the local natives came to the conclusion that in the white man's tribal set-up there were more chiefs than Indians.

With the discovery of gold on the mainland and an influx of miners into the interior of the H B C empire, James Douglas extended his jurisdiction to the mainland goldfields with a series of proclamations banning prospecting and mining except under a licence issued by the Hudson's Bay Company. By this time he was signing himself "His Excellency, James Douglas, Governor of Vancouver Island and its Dependencies, Commander-in-Chief and Vice-Admiral of the same".

While his "Vice-Admiralcy" presumably referred to possession of H B C Propeller *Otter* it is difficult to determine what the "Dependencies" were, unless this reference was to the islands in the Gulf of Georgia which were dependent on Vancouver Island for shelter from westerly gales.

In any case the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who by this time felt that there was some confusion as to what Empire was being built west of the Rockies, suggested a parliamentary committee to investigate the affairs of the Colony. This committee, in due course, expressed the opinion "that it will be proper to terminate the connection of the Hudson's Bay Company with Vancouver Island as soon as it can be conveniently done".

Accordingly a bill was introduced into the House of Commons to provide for a new colony on the mainland. The name, chosen by Queen Victoria, was to be British Columbia. In order not to waste the exceptional talents of James Douglas he was offered the appointment of Governor of the new colony provided that he forsook the Hudson's Bay Company and the Puget Sound Agricultural Company. As a further precaution against having the new colonial legislature resemble a board meeting of the Hudson's Bay Company, Lytton suggested that the Governor advise him of any situations he needed filled and he would make careful selections of these in England. Douglas accepted, England bought back the Hudson's Bay land grant (at H B C prices) and the great company turned once more to its original vocation—the development of the fur trade.



But the era of monopoly fur trade in Canada was drawing to a close. The role of the Company as "true and absolute Lordes and Proprietors" of half a continent, defined in the Royal Charter of 1670, ended with Canadian Confederation in 1867. Under the Rupert's Land Act of 1868 this vast H B C empire would revert to the Crown to be transferred to Canada. In the Deed of Surrender of 1869, the Company reserved to the last its ancient prerogatives of barter and collected from Canada 300,000 pounds as compensation and one-twentieth of the land in every township in the fertile belt. Of the volume of business operated in the north today by the great company, fur represents about ten per cent.

With the end of the H B C monopoly, the Canadian fur trade became a highly competitive activity. The "free-trader" who had appeared on the scene here and

there when the Company was not looking, was now able to operate freely, and vied with the established trading post for a share of the Indian's winter fur catch. Settlers, too, saw in the fur trade a means of supplementing the meager incomes derived from agriculture and soon became proficient trappers, and today much of Canada's fur harvest is taken by the non-Indian trapper.

. . . beaver had a practical value in the manufacture of felt boots

Early in the twentieth century fur ranching took form with fox farms and has since developed, particularly in respect of mink, into a scientific livestock operation that today contributes two-thirds of the value of Canadian raw fur production annually. The average annual value of this production for the ten-year period 1950 to 1959 was about 25 million dollars.

The Canadian fur industry today is involved with considerably more than the processes of collection and export that comprised its early history. Its present divisions include marketing, production, processing, manufacturing and retailing. Where the Micmacs once marketed their furs by holding them out on sticks at Gaspé, we now display them by holding them out on models at Paris, London, Frankfurt, Milan, New York and Montreal. Where the hat-makers of New Rochelle once established a guild-empire in Europe by converting only the darkest and oiliest of *castor gras* into beaver hats, we now have *castor sec* appearing as ladies coats in such ingenious shades as oyster, white, and caramel. And where Captain Cook's seamen once acquired fur coats for a handful of nails, it is questionable if they could buy one of the finer products today if they mortgaged the ship.

It is interesting to note, however, that the nucleus of this vast and historic fur trade enterprise has retained its original location. The Winter Fur Auction at Beaver Hall still holds on the banks of the Thames, where centuries ago the departures and arrivals of fur trade vessels were of concern to every London merchant. With the experience of 300 years of trade to rely on the old firms, the Hudson's Bay Company (1670), Smith's of Watling Street (1797) and other well established wholesaling businesses, still bring together for the entrepôt trade of the world the raw furs of the continents. The London Board of Trade figures for 1963 show an import of 48 million pounds sterling in furs for the City, and an export of 41 million. In 1670 Grosseilliers made the initial import from James Bay—valued at 1,300 pounds sterling —and conceivably deposited it in one of the warehouses still in use. The "Adventurers of England" were well named.

In conclusion, a brief survey of the changes in the use of fur from early Canadian to contemporary times may be of interest. Initially, furs were of garment value; later, the hat trade created the chief demand for beaver furs. While Cartier may be credited with initiating this demand in Europe, and Grosseilliers and Radisson should be credited with supplying it, Napoleon must be credited with discontinuing it, since it was during his era of influence that gentlemen's beaver hats were exchanged for helmets throughout most of Europe. During the retreat from Moscow it was also demonstrated that beaver fur had a practical value in Russia in the manufacture of felt boots, and this use is still practised. Newfoundland seal is also used today in the making of boots and hats. Garment furs now include most of the wild-fur species.

While the fur coat in Canada today may be considered a luxury item, this is no more than its due. Seldom in history has the evolution of a nation been more directly influenced by a natural product than has that of Canada by fur. A garment more symbolic of the history, romance, tradition and natural wealth of this country would be difficult to find. ◆