

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The North West Company

Lawrence J. Burpee

Volume 2, Number 1, 1923

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300018ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300018ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Burpee, L. J. (1923). The North West Company. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 2(1), 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300018ar>

HISTORICAL PAPERS AND ADDRESSES

THE NORTH WEST COMPANY

BY

LAWRENCE J. BURPEE

(This address, designed to suggest the possibilities of the scheme of skeleton or outline lectures which the Association is preparing in collaboration with the Dominion Archives, was illustrated by means of wall maps, coloured and uncoloured lantern slides, phonograph records, motion pictures and a village chorus.)

By all odds the most interesting question that has been brought before the association during the last twelve months is that of a series of illustrated skeleton lectures on different phases of Canadian history. This project originated with a member of the Association. Dr. J. C. Webster, of Shediac, New Brunswick, who discussed it with Dr. Doughty and myself. The idea, very briefly, is to have prepared outline lectures dealing with all the more important epochs or incidents in our history, each lecture to be accompanied by a series of lantern slides that would effectively illustrate it, and perhaps by other appropriate material, such as large-scale maps and diagrams, and possibly in some cases, motion pictures and phonograph records.

The scheme, so far as it has been mapped out in discussion, is not to be bound by any rigid rules. One lecture, for instance, might deal with the sieges of Quebec, or with only one of them; another with the founding of Halifax and its early history; others with the story of the Acadians, the United Empire Loyalists, the Jesuit Missionaries of New France, the Selkirk Settlement, the Canada Company, the War of 1812, the Hudson's Bay Company, the Fenian Raids, the story of Montreal, of Ottawa, Toronto or other Canadian towns, the discovery and exploration of Hudson bay, the search for an overland route to the Pacific, the story of Champlain, La Salle, Frontenac, Wolfe, Brock, Simcoe, Sir John Macdonald, Joseph Howe, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Laurier, Blake, and so forth. There are almost limitless opportunities to build up skeleton lectures on men and events that were part and parcel of the history of Canada.

The intention is that each of these skeleton lectures will be prepared by someone recognized as an authority on that particular subject; and one of the first questions that must be determined is just how far these lectures should be carried. What we must aim at is the happy medium between a bald outline and a complete lecture; between a bone-dry skeleton and a living and full-blooded organism. That, after all, is not quite so simple a question as it might appear to be. The object of these lectures is to supply teachers in public and

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

high schools and others who are in a position to use it, with authentic material to be moulded into any form that they may find most effective. Now it is obvious that one man might be already so well informed that only a few special hints might be needed, while another would need a good deal of help to get his subject into satisfactory shape. The thing must be flexible enough to meet a great variety of cases. It must convey sufficient, but not too much, information. But, above all, it must be authoritative. Its main justification will be that it affords an effective medium for the spreading among Canadians, and perhaps also among those who are not Canadians, of accurate information and sound interpretation in the matter of Canadian history.

As a first step, a careful survey is being made of all the available sources of illustrative material that may be converted into slides. This material will be classified, so that anyone undertaking the preparation of one of the skeleton lectures will know exactly what pictures he has at his disposal. As a matter of fact, in most cases the lectures will probably be written around the pictures, rather than the pictures fitted into the lecture. When a lecture has been completed, a number of copies of the text and an equal number of sets of the slides will be prepared, and these will be put at the disposal of those who can make effective use of them.

I had thought that, as the association will, I hope, take an active part in the preparation of these skeleton lectures, it might be worth while to attempt to give a concrete example of one of them. I am not offering this as a model form of lecture, for I am not yet clear in my own mind as to just what form these outlines should take, or as to how much should be embodied in them. It is merely a suggestion of some things that might be included in a particular lecture. Because I happen to have given a little thought and investigation to the western fur trade, I have taken as my subject the story of the North West Company. The material that I have to illustrate it has been hastily gathered together, and is very far from complete. It may, however, serve to suggest the possibilities of this side of the scheme. This material is partly in the form of slides, partly in the shape of a wall map, partly in motion pictures, and partly in phonograph records and a village chorus. These means of illustration may, in many cases, be effectively used for such a purpose.

Now anyone purposing to lecture on the North West Company would, it seems to me, make Montreal his point of departure. The North West Company was born in Montreal, and Montreal remained its headquarters until it was finally absorbed by its great rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, in 1821. Although the sturdy and adventurous spirits who created this essentially Canadian body, with all it stood for in pluck and energy, trade and exploration, are to-day

almost completely forgotten, there are still some suggestive things to be seen in and about Montreal, if you go about with your eyes open. Beaver Hall Hill itself is a perpetual reminder. Here stood for many years Beaver Hall, the home of Joseph Frobisher, one of the founders of the company. Near the head of Simpson street, let into the wall of a house, is a tablet recording this as the site of the home of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, fur trader, discoverer of the Mackenzie river, and the first white man to realize the old dream of an overland route to the Pacific. Another tablet, near the foot of St. Urbain street, marks the site of the home of Alexander Henry, another of the *bourgeois* of the North West Company. And in a courtyard, on the left side of St. Gabriel street, as you go down the hill from Notre Dame, still stood, up to a few weeks ago, practically as it did a century and a quarter ago, the old warehouse of the company.

(Slides: Old Montreal)

Parkman gives us a glimpse of what Montreal was in the palmy days of the fur trade. "The Montreal of that time (1760) was a long, narrow assemblage of wooden or stone houses, one or two stories high, above which rose the peaked towers of the Seminary, the spires of three churches, the walls of four convents, with the trees of their adjacent gardens and conspicuous at the lower end, a high mound of earth, crowned by a redoubt, where a few cannon were mounted. The whole was surrounded by a shallow moat and a bastioned stone wall, made for defence against Indians, and incapable of resisting cannon." These fortifications, built by the engineer De Léry in 1723, were not removed until early in the following century. A narrow lane shows where they once stood. Many of the substantial stone buildings of the French period are still standing to-day, and, looking down one of the ancient thoroughfares toward the water front, from say the Place d'Armes, and shutting one's eyes and ears to the unattractive sights and sounds of twentieth century traffic, it is not very difficult to imagine oneself in the Montreal of the North West Company.

One who is preparing a lecture on the fur trade will, however, probably demand something more substantial than imagination to build his story upon. To get the right perspective he will need to have a pretty fair grasp of the historical background—Montreal and Canada before the conquest, and after the conquest—the political, economic and social conditions that made possible such an organization as the North West Company, and that influenced its history. This historical background he will find in the works of such men as Abbé Casgrain, Parkman, Garneau and Bibaud, De Gaspé and Peter Kalm. Wrong, Lucas, Colby and Biggar; and specifically for Montreal of the latter half of the eighteenth century, in Atherton, Bosworth, McLennan and Sandham. (I have

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

avoided titles and other bibliographical details, but of course these would form an important part of the skeleton lectures.)

Getting back to the North West Company, the documentary sources are both in print and manuscript. Manuscript material relating to the company is principally in the Archives at Ottawa and in the McGill University Library; also in the archives of the Montreal Court House, in the manuscript collections of the Michigan and Wisconsin Historical Societies, the Burton Collection at Detroit, and some minor sources. Much the most important material in print is Masson's "Bourgeois de la compagnie du Nord-Ouest," which consists of original journals and narratives by members of the North West Company, gathered by Roderick McKenzie, of the company, and published by the late Senator Masson with a valuable introduction. The introduction is in French, and most of the journals in English. Other original sources in print are Alexander Mackenzie's History of the Fur Trade, in his "Voyages," and the published narratives of David Thompson, Alexander Henry, and his nephew of the same name, Harmon, Franchère, Alexander Ross and Ross Cox, all members of the North West Company. Then there are the various histories or historical studies of the fur trade, by Davidson, Bryce, Miss Laut and the present speaker. So far as the printed sources are concerned, except in one or two cases where the books have become rare, a mere reference would be sufficient in the skeleton lecture. For the manuscript sources, it will probably be found desirable to include extracts from the original documents in the outline.

Now, what shall we glean from these manuscript and printed sources, that would help a man to lecture intelligently, accurately, and, let us hope, without boring his audience? There it is that we shall find many things relating to the North West Company, to the independent traders who created the company, to the conditions of the fur trade, the character of those engaged in it, their relations with the Indians and with their trade rivals of the XY Company, the Hudson's Bay Company and various American companies, how and where they travelled, the character of their trading posts and the life they lived there, the tremendously important explorations they carried out merely as incidents of their work as fur-traders, their fisheries, modes of hunting the buffalo, trapping beaver, and a host of minor points, the relative importance of which depends a good deal upon the individual point of view.

(Wall map showing trade routes and posts)

As to the illustrative material, to begin with, this wall map of the Dominion shows in a general way the water thoroughfares of the fur trade, from Montreal westward. There were, as you will see, two routes from Montreal to lake Huron, one by way of the Ottawa river,

lake Nipissing and French river, and the other, by way of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes. The former, however, was the recognized route of the Nor' Westers. The Lakes route led more particularly to Detroit, an important point in the fur trade under both French and British rule. From lake Huron the route followed the north shore of lake Huron, or the south shore of Manitoulin island; then up St. Mary's river to lake Superior, and along the north shore of that lake to its western end. There the fur-traders used, at different times, three distinct routes as far as Rainy lake, one by way of Grand Portage, the second up the Kaministikwia, and the third by Fond du Lac and the St. Louis river.

From Rainy lake, the fur-traders descended Rainy river to the lake of the Woods, and Winnipeg river to lake Winnipeg. From this great central reservoir, water routes radiated in every direction, north-east to Hudson bay, south by way of Red river to the upper Mississippi, from Red river up the Assiniboine and then overland to the Missouri, and west from the upper end of lake Winnipeg up the Saskatchewan. From Cumberland lake, on the Saskatchewan, small streams and lakes led north to Frog portage and the Churchill, west up that river to Methye portage or Portage La Locke, and down the Clearwater to the Athabaska river and the lake of the same name. From lake Athabaska, Slave river led to Great Slave lake and the Mackenzie.

Various routes were used by the fur-traders to get over the Rockies. The earliest was by way of Peace river and the Peace River pass. Others were by the Athabaska and Athabaska pass; and the Saskatchewan and Howse pass. The Peace river route connected with the Fraser river west of the mountains, and both the Athabaska and Howse routes led to the Columbia and the Kootenay. Nature, it will be seen, had given the fur-trader a marvellous system of water highways, for it is literally true that, with the exception of an occasional portage, he could and did travel by water, from lake Winnipeg, east to the Atlantic, south to the gulf of Mexico, west to the Pacific, north to the Arctic, and northeast to Hudson bay.

(Slides showing the western rivers and mountains)

Let us suppose that a certain party of fur-traders is about to start for one of the western posts. The party is in charge of a trusted officer of the North West Company. The trading goods and supplies have been loaded into a certain number of canoes, technically known as a brigade, or if it was a large expedition there might be several brigades, each of eight or ten canoes, and each brigade in charge of a guide or pilot. Each canoe carries a burden of three or four tons, and is manned by eight or nine voyageurs.

They embark at Lachine, and as the paddles dip into the water, some one starts up one of the old chansons, and the others join in.

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

(Canoe songs of old voyageurs reproduced on the phonograph:

*“A la claire fontaine,” “L'aviron qui nous monte,
qui nous mène.”)*

There are many contemporary accounts to choose from of the canoe brigades of the North West Company, and their modes of travel. They were described by Alexander Ross, by Daniel Williams Harmon (whose daughter, by the way, as some of you may remember, kept a girls' school in Ottawa some years ago), by Alexander Henry, and others. Here is the account of Peter Grant, of the North West Company, whose narrative is in the Masson collection:—

“The North West Company's canoes,” he says, “seldom draw more than eighteen inches of water and go, generally, at the rate of six miles an hour in calm weather. When arrived at a portage, the bowman instantly jumps in the water, to prevent the canoe from touching the bottom, while the others tie their slings to the packages in the canoe and swing them on their backs to carry over the portage. The bowman and the steersman carry their canoe, a duty from which the middlemen are exempt. The whole is conducted with astonishing expedition, a necessary consequence of the enthusiasm which always attends their long and perilous voyages.

“It is pleasing to see them, when the weather is calm and serene, paddling in their canoes, singing in chorus their simple melodious strains and keeping exact time with their paddles, which effectually beguiles their labours. When they arrive at a rapid, the guide or foreman's business is to explore the waters previous to their running down with their canoes, and, according to the height of the water, they either lighten the canoe by taking out part of the cargo and carry it overland, or run down the whole load.

“It is astonishing to witness the dexterity with which they manage their canoes in those dangerous rapids, carrying them down like lightning on the surface of the water. The bowman, supported by the steersman, dexterously avoids the rocks and shoals which might touch the canoe and dash it to pieces, to the almost certain destruction of all on board. It often baffles their skill, when the water is very high, to avoid plunging in foaming swells on the very brink of the most tremendous precipices, yet those bold adventurers rather run this risk than lose a few hours by transporting the cargo overland.

“When they are obliged to stem the current in strong rapids, they haul up the canoe with a line, all hands pulling along shore and sometimes wading through the water up to their middle, except one man, who remains in the stern of the canoe in order to keep it in the proper channel. When the wind favours they always carry sail, and in a fresh gale will generally go eight or nine miles an hour.”

(Slides showing canoe brigades)

Here is a graphic touch or two from another contemporary narrative:—

“At dawn of day they set out; the men now and then relax their arms and light their pipes, but no sooner does the headway of the canoe die away than they renew their labours and their chorus, a particular voice being ever selected to lead the song. . .

“When it is practicable to make way in the dark, four hours is the voyageurs’ allowance of rest; and at time, on boisterous lakes and bold shores, they keep for days and nights together on the water, without intermission and without repose. They sing to keep time to their paddles; they sing to keep off drowsiness, caused by their fatigue; and they sing because the bourgeois likes it.”

The voyageur or boatman of the North West Company formed one of the principal links between the old fur trade of the French régime and the new fur trade of British rule. He was almost invariably French Canadian, or a French half-breed, just as the partners and clerks of the company were nearly as invariably Scotch. Alexander Ross records a speech by a famous voyageur, which is an interesting revelation of the character of this now vanished type, an odd mixture of boastfulness and courage, improvidence and loyalty, endurance and recklessness and unconquerable good nature:—

“I have now,” said the voyageur, “been forty-two years in this country. For twenty-four I was a light canoe man; I required but little sleep, but sometimes got less than required. No portage was too long for me; all portages were alike. My end of the canoe never touched the ground till I saw the end of it. Fifty songs a day were nothing to me. I could carry, walk, and sing with any man I ever saw. During that period I saved the lives of ten Bourgeois, and was always the favorite, because when others stopped to carry at a bad spot, and lost time, I pushed on—over rapids, over cascades, over chutes; all were the same to me. No water, no weather ever stopped the paddle or the song. I have had twelve wives in the country; and was once possessed of fifty horses, and six running dogs, trimmed in the first style. I was then like a Bourgeois, rich and happy; no Bourgeois had better-dressed wives than I; no Indian chief finer horses; no white man better harnessed or swifter dogs. I beat all Indians at the race, and no white man ever passed me in the chase. I wanted for nothing; and I spent all my earnings in the enjoyment of pleasure. Five hundred pounds, twice told, have passed through my hands; although I now have not a spare shirt to my back, nor a penny to buy one. Yet, were I young, I should glory in commencing the same career again. I would spend another half century in the same way. There is no life so happy as a voyageur’s life; none so

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

independent; no place where a man enjoys so much variety and freedom as in the Indian country. Huzza! huzza! pour le pays sauvage!"

(Slides showing voyageurs)

The first important stopping place of the fur trader on his way west from Montreal was Michilimackinac—or Mackinaw as it is known to-day—once a very important trading centre on the straits between lakes Huron and Michigan. Jonathan Carver describes this place as it was in 1766. "A fort composed of a strong stockade, usually defended by a garrison of one hundred men. It contains about thirty houses, one of which belongs to the governor, and another to the commissary. Several traders also dwell within its fortifications." In Harmon's day, 1800, the fort had been moved from the mainland to an island about eight miles distant. "The fort," he says, "is built on a beautiful rise of ground, which is joined to the main island by a narrow neck of land. . . . The North West Company have a house and store here." He says that the company built canoes here, for sending into the interior, and down to Montreal. Spirits were sold for six dollars a gallon at Michilimackinac—which Harmon evidently thought an outrageous price.

Alexander Henry, speaking of the old fort on the mainland, says that on the bastions were two small pieces of brass English cannon. It is probable that these guns were part of the plunder of De Troyes and Iberville, when they captured Forts Albany and Hayes, on Hudson bay, in 1686.

The next important stopping place was Fort William, at the upper end of lake Superior. One may note, however, that in passing up St. Marys river to lake Superior, the fur-traders used a small lock and canal at Sault Ste. Marie, built by the North West Company toward the end of the eighteenth century. The diminutive lock was restored a few years ago, and to-day affords a curious contrast to the huge modern locks near it, capable of accommodating great lake freighters with their cargoes of half a million bushels of grain.

As Fort William was for years the principal post of the North West Company, and the scene of that annual gathering of the partners of which Washington Irving has given such a graphic description in *Astoria*, it may be worth while to quote the description of one who knew it in its prime, Ross Cox:—

"Fort William," he says, "is the great emporium for the interior. An extensive assortment of merchandise is annually brought hither from Montreal, by large canoes, or the company's vessels on the lakes, which, in return, bring down the produce of the wintering posts to Canada, from whence it is shipped to England. A number of the partners and clerks, whose turn of rotation has not arrived for going to Montreal, assemble here every summer, and deposit the furs which they purchase during the winter, when they obtain a fresh supply

of trading goods for the ensuing season. Those on their way to Canada also remain some time previous to their final departure. In addition to these, one or two of the principle directors, and several clerks, come up every spring from Montreal to make the necessary changes, and superintend the distribution of the merchandise for the wintering parties. Fort William may, therefore, be looked upon as the metropolitan post of the interior, and its fashionable season generally continues from the latter end of May to the latter end of August. During this period, good living and festivity predominate; and the luxuries of the dinner table compensate in some degree for the long fasts and short commons experienced by those who are stationed in the remote posts. The voyageurs also enjoy their carnival, and between rum and baubles the hard-earned wages of years are often dissipated in a few weeks. . . .

"The dining hall," says Cox, "is a noble apartment, and sufficiently capacious to entertain two hundred. A finely executed bust of the late Simon McTavish is placed in it, with portraits of various proprietors. . . . At the upper end of the hall there is a very large map of the Indian country, drawn with great accuracy by Mr. David Thompson, astronomer to the company." By the way, this famous map, brown with age, is preserved in the Provincial Archives at Toronto.

"The buildings at Fort William," continues Cox, "consist of a large house, in which the dining hall is situated, and in which the gentleman in charge resides; the council-house; a range of snug buildings for the accommodation of the people from the interior; a large counting-house; the doctor's residence; extensive stores for the merchandise and furs; a forge; various workshops, with apartments for the mechanics, a number of whom are always stationed here. There is also a prison for refractory voyageurs. The whole is surrounded by wooden fortifications, flanked by bastions, and is sufficiently strong to withstand any attack from the natives. Outside the fort is a shipyard, in which the company's vessels on the lake are built and repaired. The kitchen-garden is well stocked, and there are extensive fields of Indian corn and potatoes. There are also several head of cattle, with sheep, hogs, poultry, etc., and a few horses for domestic use. . . ."

Leaving this busy centre of the fur trade behind, the brigade of canoes pushes its way to the westward, following the waterways already mentioned, and gradually disintegrating as some of the canoes with their cargoes of trading goods are dropped at one post or another. We may as well follow one of them, and get some idea of the life of a fur-trader at one of those remote forts on the Saskatchewan.

Here is Alexander Ross' description of the landing at a river post:—

“When about to arrive at the place of their destination, the voyageurs dress with neatness, put on their plumes, and a chosen song is raised. They push up against the beach, as if they meant to dash the canoe into splinters; but most adroitly back their paddles at the right moment, whilst the foreman springs on shore and, seizing the prow, arrests the vessel in its course. Every person advances to the waterside and guns are fired to announce the bourgeois' arrival. A general shaking of hands takes place, as it often happens that people have not met for years; even the bourgeois goes through this mode of salutation with the meanest. There is, perhaps, no country where the ties of affection are more binding than here. Each addresses his comrades as his brothers; and all address themselves to the bourgeois with reverence, as if he were their father.”

From the journal of another fur trader, in 1799, we get odd glimpses of his daily life. Trading between white man and Indian was a different thing to trade of white with white. There has been a good deal of criticism of the fur-traders, of their injustice to the Indians, their outrageous profits, the use they made of liquor to corrupt the natives. Sometimes these charges were justified, but as a general rule they misrepresent the situation. The evils that did creep into the fur trade were almost entirely due to the fierce rivalry that developed between the competing companies. The use of rum was a case in point. Men like David Thompson refused to have it at their posts on any terms. Others were less scrupulous, if by its use they could steal a march on a competitor. The rum that the Indian got was, in any event, usually one part rum to seven parts water.

Then in judging as to the fairness or otherwise of the fur-trader's profit, it is reasonable to take into account all the conditions. The goods that the trader exchanged for furs came from England in sailing ships to Quebec. There they were transferred to river boats and carried up to Montreal. From Montreal they were sent inland by canoe to some remote trading post. The furs obtained in exchange had to follow the same long, roundabout route to the London market. In the case of some of the most remote posts in the far northwest, it has been estimated that it took six or seven years for the company to get its return on a particular investment in trading goods. The profits were not so extravagant, therefore, as they might appear to be on the surface. And, as far as the Indian was concerned, it must be remembered that the ammunition, tobacco, fishing hooks, needles, and other commodities he purchased from the trader, were much more valuable to him than the skins he gave in exchange. Even so, he very soon learned to drive a shrewd bargain and take advantage of the competition of rival traders.

But to return to the journal of 1799. The system of credit developed in the early days of the fur trade, together with the practice of giving presents to the Indians, both of course designed to encourage them to trade at a particular fort. Thus we find here:—

“Gave credits to the Whitefish’s son and *gendre* (son-in-law); they go to their lands, but promise to be back next winter. Gave the Whitefish’s son, for nothing, 1 awl, 1 fire steel, 1 gun worm, 3 flints, 1 common belt, 2 horn combs, 1 hook, 1 needle and 34 fathoms rotten tobacco. . . .

“This morning Marlin sent the English Chiefs for ammunition, tobacco, combs and vermilion. Sent him two measures ammunition, $\frac{1}{2}$ fath. tobacco, 1 comb and a little vermilion mixed with flour. They arrived soon after in great pomp, in all 20 men. . . .

“After they paid the most of their credits, amounting to 1,101 skins, Martin was clothed.” That is to say, the trader officially recognized this Indian as a chief by presenting him with a ceremonial coat.

“Several harangues suitable to the occasion,” continues the journal, “were made on both sides, and the new chief, with his laced coat, stalked along to his lodge, just an hour after sunset. He made many ceremonies before he accepted of the laced coat; he wished to have a red greatcoat, short breeches and cotton stockings, like the English Chief some years ago at the Old Fort; he would not be a petty chief; he aspired to be raised from nothing to the highest pitch of glory. In short, his head was already so intoxicated by his change of fortune, that he did not know which end of him stood upper-most.”

(Motion pictures: historical pageant at Fort Kootenay, in 1922)

An important problem at the trading posts was, of course, that of the food supply. Very little could be brought up from Montreal, and each post had to support itself from what could be obtained in the surrounding country. Consequently the daily meals varied at different posts, in quality, quantity and variety. While those at posts on the prairie had generally an abundant supply of buffalo meat, venison and small game, the traders around Lake Superior lived upon whitefish and lake trout, those at Cumberland House on sturgeon, and west of the mountains on salmon.

But the fur-trader, inured to hardships, rarely complained of the quality of his food if the quantity was all right. Sometimes he was hard put to it to keep alive. Buffalo would be nowhere in his neighbourhood, his nets might produce nothing, his supply of pemmican or dried fish be exhausted. Then he had to fall back on the sorry expedients of the starving. Harmon, for instance, writes in his Journal for 1804: “For some time after our arrival, we subsisted on rosebuds, a kind of food neither very palatable nor nourishing, which

we gathered in the fields. They were better than nothing since they would just support life." Elsewhere he says: "For six days we subsisted at the fort on parchment skins, dogs, herbs and a few small fish." Fur-traders as well as explorers, particularly in the far north, sometimes were driven to live for days or even weeks on nothing more nourishing than *tripe de roche*, a peculiarly unpalatable lichen or moss. And yet, as we have abundant evidence, they enjoyed their life, and would not exchange it for one of comfort or even luxury in more civilized communities.

Nor, except at the smaller and more remote establishments, was the life of the fur-trader quite so uncivilized as one might suppose. Fort Chipewyan, for instance, had quite a respectable library; and at all the larger posts the number of white traders, with their wives and families, and the addition of visitors from neighbouring posts, with the occasional appearance of traders on their way down to or up from headquarters, made up a little community sufficient for most social needs. At least that was evidently the opinion of the writer of the following sketch:—

"Even in this barbarous country," he says, "woman claims and enjoys her due share of attention and regard. Her presence brightens the gloom of the solitary post; her smiles add a new charm to the pleasures of the wilderness. Nor are the ladies deficient in those accomplishments which procure admiration. Although descended from aboriginal mothers, many of the females at the different establishments throughout the Indian countries are as fair as the generality of European ladies; the mixture of blood being so many degrees removed from the savage as hardly to leave any trace, while at the same time, their delicacy of form, their light and nimble movements, and the penetrating expression of the 'bright, black eye' combine to render them objects of no ordinary interest. They have also made considerable progress in refinement, and, with their natural acuteness and singular talent for imitation, they soon acquire all the ease and gracefulness of polished life. On holidays the dresses are as gay as in longer-settled countries; and on these occasions the gentleman puts on the beaver hat, the ladies make a fine show of silks and satins, and even jewellery is not wanting. It is not surprising, therefore, that the roving North Wester, after so many rural enjoyments, and a residence of twenty years, should feel more real happiness in these scenes than he can hope for in any other country."

To the fur-traders' articles of subsistence should perhaps have been added his two indispensable luxuries—tea and tobacco, both of which he liked strong. The tobacco came in long twists or ropes, and in commerce was sold by the fathom. Possibly also sufficient emphasis has not been put upon the importance of pemmican in the fur-trader's bill of fare. It was his daily bread, his staff of life.

ANNUAL REPORT, 1923

Made from the lean meat, usually of buffalo, dried and pounded fine, mixed with melted fat, sometimes with the addition of sugar or dried berries, it was packed tightly into skin bags, and, unless exposed to moisture, would keep for years. The trader always took a supply with him on his excursions, and always tried to keep a reserve in his post for a hungry day. It was one of the most important duties of the posts in the prairie country to prepare large quantities of pemmican, which was distributed among the posts remote from the range of the buffalo, or where such substitutes as deer, bear, moose or cariboo were not readily obtainable.

(Slides: animal life)

This responsibility of the prairie traders made the hunting of the buffalo a matter of duty as well as pleasure. To secure a sufficient supply of fresh meat for their own posts, and pemmican for the various establishments dependent upon them, they could not always depend upon hunting the buffalo on their fleet ponies, but resorted also to an old contrivance of the Indians called buffalo pounds. These consisted of two long lines of fences, or bushes, converging to a gateway leading into a circular enclosure. A herd of buffalo was driven down between the fences, and when they were all in the enclosure, the entrance was blocked, and the traders then shot them at their leisure. Among the Indians the practice was more ceremonial. After the herd had entered the enclosure, the principal chief would light his pipe, and, pointing it at an ancient bull that he considered to be the father or chief of the herd, would harangue him something to this effect: "My Grandfather, we are glad to see you, and happy to find that you are not come in a shameful manner, for you have brought plenty of your young men with you. Be not angry with us, we are obliged to destroy you to make ourselves live."

(The buffalo: slides and motion pictures)

Only a few words more. I have attempted to tell the story of the western fur trade, under the North West Company, mainly by means of quotations from contemporary narratives. Of course it has only been possible to touch upon a very few of the many aspects of the subject. The story of the fur trade is full of romantic incidents, dramatic moments, as well as of interludes that, while prosaic, are of interest to the student of history, of commerce, of ethnology, of natural history. In the actual skeleton lecture these other sides of the story would as far as possible or expedient be represented by references to reliable authorities.

So far as the history of the North West Company is concerned as a distinct organization, it came to an end in 1821 with the fusion of the two organizations, the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. Thereafter the fur trade took on a different charac-

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

ter, became more modern, more business like, perhaps more efficient, under the skilful guidance of Sir George Simpson. Certainly after 1821, much of the romance of the old life of the fur trader disappeared, that romance that was so appropriately illustrated in the annual meetings at Fort William. And so we may say, with Washington Irving: "The feudal state of Fort William is at an end; its council chamber is silent and desolate; its banquet hall no longer echoes to the auld world ditty; the lords of the lakes and forests have passed away."

(Canoe and dance songs by French-Canadian voyageurs—Trefflé Bigras and family, from Gatineau Point, Wright Co., P.Q.).