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Report of the Annual Meeting

## The North West Company

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## THE NORTH WEST COMPANY

LAWRENCE J. BURPEE

## FIELD

The history of the North West Company falls naturally enough into four periods: (1) Origin, (2) Rivalry with X Y Company, (3) Western Expansion, (4) Rivalry with Hudson's Bay Company. A lecture might be given on any one of these periods; or it might be devoted to a survey of the history of the North West Company as a whole. The suggestions that follow relate more particularly to the latter.

## SOURCES

These, as in nearly all cases, may be divided into Primary and Secondary Sources, and the latter into Manuscript and Printed. Brief titles only are used here. Full titles will be found in the bibliography at the end of the outline. Generally speaking the Secondary Sources will be found more accessible than the Primary; but even in the former class are several books which to-day are found only in the larger public libraries and in some private collections of Canadiana. Books which are believed to be readily accessible are starred in the bibliography.

(1) *Primary Sources (a) Manuscript.*—The two principal collections of material relating to the history of the North West Company are in the Public Archives of Canada at Ottawa and in the Archives of McGill University Library, Montreal. These consist for the most part of manuscript journals by men who were engaged in the western fur trade for the North West Company. They include also a certain amount of material bearing upon the purely commercial side of the fur trade; minutes of the Beaver Club of Montreal, etc. Other sources of manuscript material are the Toronto Public Reference Library, the British Museum, the Public Record Office in London, the Bancroft Library in the University of California, the British Columbia Archives in Victoria, the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, the Michigan Historical Society in Lansing, the Burton Collection in the Detroit Public Library, the Archives of the Montreal Court House, the Provincial Archives at Quebec. There are probably scattered documents in other sources. It may be said, however, that the sum of all the manuscript material in the above-mentioned sources represents but a small part of the documents that exist, or at some time did exist, relating to the commercial and other relations of the North West Company. Where these other papers are at the present time, if they have not been destroyed, is not known.

(b) *Printed.*—The main collection of journals and other documents relating to the North West Company is in Masson's *Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*. Others are found in the *Canadian Archives Reports and Publications*; in the *Wisconsin Historical Collections*; the publications of the Michigan Historical Society; the *Quarterly* of the Washington Historical Society, and of the Oregon Historical Society; and in such published journals as Mackenzie's *Voyages*, Henry's *Travels and Adventures*, Franchère's *Narrative*, Harmon's *Journal*, Cox's *Adventures*, Ross's *Fur Hunters and First Settlers*, the *Henry-Thompson Journals* edited by Coues.

## (2) Secondary Sources

The field is too large to do more than suggest here some of the books that it is believed will be found most useful. A larger list, which, however, does not by any means profess to be exhaustive, will be found in the bibliography. Davidson, *North West Company*, Bancroft, *North West Coast*, Bryce, *Hudson's Bay Company*, Burpee, *Search for the Western Sea*, Bryce, *Mackenzie, Selkirk, Simpson, Laut, Conquest of the Great Northwest*, Kelson, *Annals of Fort Mackinac*, Martin, *Selkirk's Work in Canada, Origin and Progress of the North West Company*, Selkirk, *Sketch of the British Fur Trade*.

## ORIGIN

A lecture on the North West Company might conveniently and logically open with a very brief sketch of the fur trade as it was at the close of the period of French rule in Canada, and an equally brief statement of the commercial life of Montreal in the first decade or two of British rule. Both contributed to the establishment of the North West Company. The British fur traders who organized the North West Company were the logical successors of the fur traders of New France, and were recruited from the merchants of Montreal. They got their inspiration from the former and their business training from the latter.

On the fur trade of New France, see Parkman, *Old Régime and Conspiracy of Pontiac*; Douglas, *New England and New France*; Colby, *Canadian Types of the Old Régime*; Biggar, *Early Trading Companies of New France*.

On the commercial life of Montreal in the early days of British rule, see Atherton, *Montreal*; Bosworth, *Hochelaga depicta*; Sandham, *Ville-Marie*; McLennan, *Montreal 1642-1842*; Campbell, *History of St. Gabriel St. Church*.

The story of the North West Company has also other point of contact besides the fur trade of New France and the early commercial life of Montreal. As a chapter in the history of the fur trade in North America it is linked with the stories of the X Y Company and the earlier association of Montreal traders known as the Montreal Company; and at later dates with those of the Hudson's Bay Company and various fur-trading organizations of the United States; also to some slight extent with that of the Russian fur companies. It is interwoven with the story of western exploration; and also with the history of early settlement on the Red river, the Saskatchewan, and the Pacific coast. It touches very closely the life of the North American Indian, and had a direct influence upon his character; sometimes for good, at other times for evil; it might be difficult to say which predominated. It is part of the social and political history of pre-confederation Canada.

Obviously to discuss adequately all these points of contact would take the subject far beyond the bounds of a single lecture. The lecturer must use his judgment as to how many of them he will touch upon, and to what extent. Some of them will be considered briefly in later sections of this outline.

## X Y COMPANY

The relations of the North West Company with the X Y Company have been very adequately treated in Davidson's *North West Company*,

ch. iv; also in ch. xvii of Bryce's *Hudson's Bay Company*. See also Mason's *Esquisse* in his *Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*; Mackenzie's "History of the Fur Trade" in his *Voyages*; Burpee, *Search for the Western Sea*; Laut, *Conquest of the Great Northwest*; Landmann,

*Adventures and Recollections.*

The X Y Company grew out of dissatisfaction on the part of certain partners of the North West Company with its administration, and in particular with the overbearing character of Simon McTavish. McTavish and Sir Alexander Mackenzie mixed no better than oil and water, and when the latter became the directing force of the X Y Company, bitter trade rivalry developed. This led to the free use of intoxicating liquors by both sides to secure the trade of the Indians; and at remote posts in the interior the rival traders often came to blows. The situation had become almost intolerable when the death of McTavish removed the chief obstacle in the way of reconciliation, and the X Y Company was absorbed by the North West Company.

WESTERN EXPANSION

All effective opposition, except that of the Hudson's Bay Company, having now been removed, the North West Company expanded rapidly not only in trade but in territory covered. It counted among its members such enthusiastic explorers as Alexander Mackenzie, David Thompson and Simon Fraser, whose narratives, as well as those of Alexander Henry and his nephew of the same names, Harmon, and others, throw a great deal of light upon this period of the Company's history.

The trading posts of the company at this time extended from Sault Ste. Marie westward on both sides of lake Superior to Grand Portage, thence inland on Rainy lake and other waters between lake Superior and lake Winnipeg, on the Red and Assiniboine rivers, the Saskatchewan, Churchill, Athabaska, Peace and Mackenzie rivers. There were posts in what is now Minnesota and elsewhere in the northwestern territory of the United States; and also several in what was known as the King's Domain, on the north side of the lower St. Lawrence.

HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

Rivalry between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company began in the early days of the former. The Hudson's Bay Company at first looked upon the Montreal traders with scorn as mere "pedlars," and, relying upon their prestige with the Indians, refused for a time to establish posts in the interior. They quickly learned, however, that if they did not do so most of their business would be taken from them by the North West Company. Having been stirred out of their lethargy, they became aggressive competitors, and on all the principal rivers of the west rival trading posts sprang up flying the flags of the respective companies.

The story of the X Y Company and the North West Company was repeated, but the rivalry of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company grew even more virulent than that of the two Montreal corporations. The clash of interests finally culminated in such tragic incidents as the Seven Oaks Affair, 1816, and the death of Benjamin Frobisher, 1819. The responsible leaders of both companies recognized

that the course that was being followed was suicidal, and after protracted negotiation the North West Company became absorbed in the Hudson's Bay Company.

Light is thrown on this period of the North West Company's history by Davidson's *North West Company*, Bryce's *Hudson's Bay Company*, Martin's *Selkirk's Work in Canada*, Masson's *Bourgeois*, Coues, *Henry-Thompson Journals*, Ross, *Fur Hunters*.

#### DATES

These are the more important dates in the history of the North West Company: Organized 1783-84; absorbed Montreal Company 1787; new agreement 1802; X Y Company absorbed 1804; first post established west of the Rockies 1806; union with Hudson's Bay Company, 1821.

#### REFERENCES

The following references are merely suggestive. Additional information will be found in one or other of the various works listed in the bibliography:—

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New York, 1903; \*Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, Toronto, 1901; \*Washington Irving, *Astoria*, New York, 1861; D. H. Kelton, *Annals of Fort Mackinac*, Chicago, 1882; George Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, London, 1852; \*A. C. Laut, *Conquest of the Great Northwest*, New York, 1908; \*Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans*, New York, 1902; Wm. McLennan, "Montreal, 1642-1842" (Semi-Can. Report, Montreal Board of Trade, 1893); \*Chester Martin, *Selkirk's Work in Canada*, Oxford, 1916; L. R. Masson, *Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, Quebec, 1889-90; \*R. O. Merriman, *The Bison and the Fur Trade* (Bulletin of the Depts. of History, etc., in Queen's University, No. 53, 1926); *A Narrative of Occurrences in the Indian Countries of North America*, London, 1817; *On the Origin and Progress of the North West Company of Canada, with a History of the Fur Trade*, London, 1811; \*Francis Parkman, *Old Régime in Canada*, Boston, 1898; \*Francis Parkman, *Conspiracy of Pontiac*, Boston, 1898; Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River*, London, 1849; Alexander Ross, *The Fur Hunters of the Far West*, London, 1855; A. Sandham, *Villemarie*, Montreal, 1870; Lord Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade in North America; with Observations relating to the North West Company of Montreal*, London, 1816; J. B. Tyrrell, *David Thompson's Narrative*, Toronto, 1916; W. H. Atherton, *Montreal*. See also: L. J. Burpee, *Encyclopaedia of Canadian History*; \*W. S. Wallace, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*; \*L. J. Burpee, *Atlas of Canadian History*; \*Reports of the Public Archives of Canada; \*Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada; \*Collections of the Wisconsin Historical Society and of the Michigan Historical Society; \*Quarterly of the Washington Historical Society and of the Oregon Historical Society.

NOTE: The books starred should be found in any fair-sized public library. The others are at least in the larger public libraries.

#### SLIDES

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|---|--|
| 1. Simon McTavish,                        | 27. Peter Pond's map,                        |
| 2. Alexander Mackenzie,                   | 28. Pond's Journal,                          |
| 3. William McGillivray,                   | 29. Traders in Indian teepee,                |
| 4. Alexander Henry,                       | 30. Ojibway camp,                            |
| 5. D. W. Harmon,                          | 31. Assiniboine Chief,                       |
| 6. Joseph Frobisher,                      | 32. Assiniboine Camp,                        |
| 7. Benjamin Frobisher,                    | 33. Mandan village on Missouri,              |
| 8. Simon Fraser,                          | 34. Traders racing for Indian camp,          |
| 9. James McGill,                          | 35. Horses crossing the Athabaska,           |
| 10. Isaac Todd,                           | 36. Fort Chipewyan,                          |
| 11. John Jacob Astor,                     | 37. Camp near Rocky Mountain House,          |
| 12. Montreal in 1800,                     | 38. Palisades of Mackenzie River,            |
| 13. Beaver Hall Hill,                     | 39. Fur traders on Churchill River,          |
| 14. Fur warehouse in Montreal,            | 40. Mackenzie's map,                         |
| 15. Tavern where Beaver Club met,         | 41. Mackenzie on his way to Pacific,         |
| 16. McTavish's home in Montreal,          | 42. Grand Canyon of Fraser River,            |
| 17. Voyageur's contract,                  | 43. Bella Coola,                             |
| 18. Beaver Club medal,                    | 44. Fort Macleod, northern British Columbia, |
| 19. Traders leaving for the west,         | 45. Thompson reaches the Columbia,           |
| 20. Portaging on the Ottawa,              | 46. Fort Kootenay restored,                  |
| 21. Fort William,                         | 47. Boat encampment on Columbia,             |
| 22. Lake of the Woods,                    | 48. Kettle Falls on Columbia,                |
| 23. Portage routes west of Lake Superior, | 49. David Thompson's map,                    |
| 24. Water routes from Lake Winnipeg,      | 50. Dr. John McLoughlin.                     |
| 25. Travelling by dog train,              |  |
| 26. Travelling in canoe,                  |  |