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IN THE DOMAIN OF THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY*

By Charles K. Leith

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AFTER sixteen consecutive days of canoeing, we came suddenly in view of the French post near Moose Factory, located on an island in Moose river 12 miles from its mouth. We landed there, thinking it to be the post of the Hudson's Bay Company. A mile away on Moose Island is the administrative headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company for the bay, which we reached an hour later. It was established in 1675, and is operated today in much the same fashion as for the past 240 years. Some of the present buildings and parts of buildings run back to the period of our American revolution. We here first experienced the charming and unique atmosphere of the Hudson's Bay posts; a charm which we also felt at each of the succeeding posts, although perhaps in a less degree. The small cultivated fields, substantial houses, with high hewn picket fences, church, rectory, school house, stores, warehouses, carpenter shop, saw mill, the great flagstaff guarded by cannon, the general air of permanence and respectability, all contrast vividly with the conditions in the wilds about. On landing, we were greeted by Mr. McAlpine, the manager of the post, and the foreman, Mr. McLeod, who, as is the custom with whites at all posts, appeared neatly dressed even to spotless collars and straw hats.

MOOSE FACTORY

Space forbids any detailed description of Moose. At every turn one sees features of interest. The place includes some 30 or 40 buildings, laid out in irregular streets, with a fringe of Indian tepees in the adjacent fields, with a permanent population of about 100 and a floating or hunting population of several hundred. It is a fully organized community with a post manager at the head of its temporal affairs, and a bishop, when in residence, at other times his assistant, in charge of its spiritual affairs. Two services are held Sundays which are well attended, and during the summer, when many Indians are at the post, there are daily services. Sunday services are conducted in English, and repeated in Indian. The first sermon we heard contained many references to the dangers to the young to be met with on the "streets of Moose," bringing us to a realization of the fact that we were in an organized community which regarded itself as a village or town. We subsequently found that at other points on the Bay the "streets of Moose" were regarded as a combination of Broadway and the Bowery.

*From "A Summer and a Winter on Hudson Bay" by C. K. and A. F. Leith. Privately published.

RUPERTS HOUSE

Ruperts House, the next post visited, on the southeast corner of the bay, is of special interest. This is nearly on the site of old Fort Charles, the first of the Hudson's Bay Company posts established in 1670. It was here also that Henrik Hudson was supposed to have wintered when he first reached the bay in 1610. It is one of the most important posts on the bay, being the distributing point for a chain of five posts, in the interior. We were the second party of visitors in several years at Ruperts, while Nitchicun, 500 miles distant in the interior, has not seen a white man since 1870.

THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

The Hudson's Bay posts visited were strikingly similar in architecture and atmosphere to Moose Factory. Indeed, this similarity extends throughout fourteen posts which it has been my privilege to visit this and other summers. The comfortable house of the manager, with its well-kept yard, hewn picket fence, huge gate, usually a garden plot for potatoes and other hardy vegetables, and buildings and pens for cows and chickens, form the central feature of most of the posts. Near it is the store, containing everything necessary for the needs of the country, from pork and flour to sewing machines and phonographs. The large warehouses are conspicuous features. At a central point, a high flagstaff is to be seen on which the Hudson's Bay flag is displayed on approach or departure of visitors. The complete control of the post manager over the affairs of his subordinates and dependent Indians, together with the regularity of the day's proceedings, marked by the bell, give an air of a certain military precision to the place quite at variance with the straggling architecture and the appearance of some of the inhabitants.

The Hudson's Bay region has been under the almost exclusive control of the Hudson's Bay Company for two hundred and forty years. A few brief attempts at competition have hitherto met with failure, but for the past few years Revillon Freres, of Paris, have been making a strong attempt to gain a foothold and have accomplished more than any of their predecessors. The Hudson's Bay Company has from the first devoted its attention exclusively to the fur trade, and has discouraged all efforts on the part of its own employes or others to develop other resources. So far have they gone in this direction as to discourage even minor changes in the manner of conducting their business, such as introducing more satisfactory means of travel and communication, which in their judgment would tend to take attention away from their principal business of securing fur. The large blank areas on existing maps of the region about Hudson's Bay are eloquent testimony of the attitude of the Company in this regard. There is today, outside of the Hudson's Bay posts and the posts of their competitors, Revillon Freres, so far as the writer knows, not one habitation of wood or stone. Probably nowhere else in the world could there be cited a similar case of arrested development of a great region under control of white people. The Company was organized to trade

in fur, and the characteristic British conservatism has kept it strictly to its text. The stock is in strong financial hands in England, largely in the nobility, whence a conservative attitude would be expected. The Company doubtless foresees that as soon as the region opens up for anything else which will bring in a population not giving its attention to trapping, its primary business of buying furs will rapidly disappear.

Perusal of the daily journals kept at each of the Hudson's Bay Company's posts brings vividly to mind the permanence of the institution. Wishing to know the probable condition of the weather for some of our trips, we were able to ascertain exactly what had happened in the way of weather, hunting, and other incidents the same date the year before, two years before, fifty years or even one hundred years before, and so far as the nature of the record is concerned and the character of the events noted there is little evidence of change in conditions.

The Hudson's Bay Company controls fifteen posts on Hudson Bay, located usually near the mouth of some river. Each post has its post manager, foreman, servants (natives and mixed breeds) from one or two to twenty, depending on the importance of the post and its quota of natives dependent upon the post. It is only during the summer, when furs are not in prime, that most of the people are to be seen about a post. Then the Indians and their families come in with their furs of the preceding winter, trade for their supplies, and have a period of social relaxation before returning to their camp grounds in the wilderness. Then the neighborhood presents lively scenes, the buildings and yards being surrounded by a fringe of tents of the visiting Indians. During the winter the Indians are scattered about the country in small groups within a radius of 150 miles or more from the post, and at the post there are only the people immediately concerned in its operation, together usually with a considerable number of natives incapacitated for trapping by age or infirmity. The total population dependent upon each of the posts ranges from fifty to eight hundred or nine hundred people.

RELATIONS OF HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY TO NATIVES

The unit of trade is the "beaver," an arbitrary value represented by a brass token issued by the Hudson's Bay Company, nominally worth a dollar, that is, a dollar in trade. In cash a beaver is worth fifty cents. When, therefore, a native is paid a beaver, and takes it out in trade, as he must, he really gets something in the neighborhood of forty cents in value.

Each Indian has a debt to the Company. When he buys his supplies for the year's hunting he is said to "get his debt." The size of the debt the Company will allow him depends somewhat upon his ability as a hunter. At the end of the year he turns in his furs in liquidation of his debt. Often he does not succeed in getting a surplus. The result is that the Company has a debt on the books for most of the Indians over whom it has control. On death or prolonged sickness the debt is wiped off.

None of the natives are independent. Attached to each of the posts are natives said to be well-to-do. These possess few evidences of worldly wealth beyond suitable clothes, substantial food, and good rifles and guns, but they have such credit with the Hudson's Bay Company as will enable them to buy certain articles they may need to help them live comfortably. This simply means that they have been sufficiently successful as hunters and have turned in enough furs to establish a certain prestige with the Company, and the Company treats them well as a reward for faithful services and as an incentive to others.

To the stranger on the Bay, at first thought, the native's lot does not seem an enviable one. The Indian is in a condition not far removed from slavery. With his best efforts he can secure for himself only food and clothes. He cannot secure independence. On the other hand, he is certain of a living if he is reasonably diligent in trapping; he will be taken care of in case of incapacitation; his family will not be allowed to starve, and above all, he is in a reasonably contented and happy frame of mind over the situation. He is better off than in the days of uncertain supplies, before the Hudson's Bay Company came, and he seemed to us better off and happier than most of our laboring people. While he undergoes hardships, he seldom endures the extremes of poverty and never feels that he is suffering injustice greater than that of his fellows; he is on a substantial social equality with the rest of the population, and altogether is a decent, self-respecting, efficient, and contented being.

The attitude of the Company toward the Indian is a curious combination of stern, relentless control with a sort of furtive kindliness. When an Indian is asked to do certain arduous work or make a dangerous trip, he has been taught to obey unquestioningly and to accomplish his mission at any cost of life or limb. He carries his message to Garcia without the prospect of being greeted as a hero on his return. If he fails to carry out his orders absolutely he will get no sympathy from either the Company or his friends. While traveling from post to post we had occasion to use a number of Indians who were picked out by the post manager to accompany us, sometimes on a trip which meant exposure and hardship for weeks; and while these Indians often disliked leaving a comfortable post and families to go off with strangers in whom they had no interest, there was never a murmur when once they had been selected to go.

About the posts the Indians are, for the most part, treated rather gruffly. Some post managers spend their time mostly at the house rather than at the store. The Indian wishing to trade, hangs around the kitchen door until he learns through the servants that the manager may be seen, then timidly knocks and comes in, hat in hand. The manager, after a time, looks up from his business or paper, or interrupts any conversation he may be carrying on and asks what is wanted, and if the Indian's credit is good, gives him an order

on the store for such things as he needs. The length of time the Indian is kept waiting and the graciousness of the post manager's behavior toward him are an excellent barometer of the Indian's standing with the Company and in the community.

By a combination of sternness and kindness the Company has been able to foster a loyalty among its servants and natives which is very unusual in a commercial concern. This same loyalty is true of the post managers.

THE INDIANS AND THE HUSKIES

The natives, both Indians and Huskies (Eskimos), show many shades of color, which fact may be correlated with the prevalence of Scotch and English names and characteristics. There is a strong family pride, much observance of form, and the language even shows Scotch modification, especially in inflection.

A universal habit on the Bay is to shake hands in meeting and parting. Wherever we stopped we found it necessary to shake hands with all members of the party, men, women, and children. Neglect of this duty was likely to be resented. In some cases, where fifty or more people were met simultaneously, the ceremony became a formidable one.

The natives work hard and lack what most of us would call the comforts and conveniences of life, but they and their ancestors have known no other way of living, and therefore do not miss the things we regard as desirable, if not essential. There is little social competition, for all are substantially on the same level. Their lives are not complicated by a multiplicity of interests and distractions, but are concentrated on the hunt which furnishes the wherewithal to live, and incidentally affords most of their pleasure. Their family life seems to the outsider remarkably happy, notwithstanding a common method of choosing mates which is often intensely practical and lacking in sentimental consideration. Mr. Nicolson, post manager for Ruperts House, told of an Indian from one of the interior posts coming to him just before our arrival, and after buying his supplies over the counter, added that he would like a wife. The post manager did not have one in stock, but not to be stumped, had a canvass made of the post, found a suitable woman, and before night had the pair wedded and started for their camp five hundred miles inland. That marriages so made could result satisfactorily is astonishing at first thought. I suspect the explanation lies largely in the unity of material interests in the family and the lack of outside distractions. From the start the entire energies of the family are devoted to making a living under strenuous conditions. The man kills the game and the woman skins it and prepares the fur and food from it. There is scarcely a day in which close co-operation is not necessary. In times of stress and adversity they must look only to themselves for help. The result is a close welding of interests and development of team work which enable them to cope with their many difficulties and which seem to make a contented, if not ideal family.

THE POST MANAGERS

The post managers warrant a bookful of character sketches. Usually of English or Scotch descent, they are selected when young men, and sent out to the Bay by the annual boat. For the first eight years they are not entitled to a furlough, and should they leave, forfeit some portion of their pay. After eight years service they are in a position to ask for a furlough, but as the rules of the Bay Company permit only one man in a district to be absent on furlough in any one year, the difficulty of getting away is so great that furloughs are few and short. It is not unusual to meet men who have not been out of the Bay in twenty-five years. One man, Mr. Jobson, the present manager of the East Main post, has not been away since his arrival there as a young man fifty years ago. The remuneration is small, usually \$400 or \$500, in exceptional cases \$1,000 per annum, but their houses, supplies, and servants are paid for by the company, so there is little need for spending their salaries.

FRENCH COMPETITION

I have referred to the competition started a few years ago by the Revillon Freres of Paris. Revillon Freres are reputed to be the largest finished-fur manufacturers in the world, and have stations for the collection of raw furs in many parts of the globe, including Asia and northern Europe as well as North America. The entrance of this firm into competition with the Hudson's Bay Company, therefore, probably begins what is perhaps the most serious competition which the Hudson's Bay Company has ever had. Since 1877, when the Hudson's Bay Company ceded to the Canadian government all its governmental rights in northern Canada, the company has had no official monopoly of the fur trade and has owned only a few acres immediately about its posts, maintaining its monopoly largely by the inertia of the business. Having been in control of the fur business for so many years, having developed a spirit of loyalty among the natives, having an extensive plant in a part of the country so inaccessible and so unfavorable to competition, it has been in a most impregnable position. Revillon Freres have, however, quietly and persistently developed their posts, have put capable men in charge, including a number of French army officers, have given every evidence that they are there to stay, and are making serious inroads into the native support of the Hudson's Bay Company. As yet their project has been a very expensive one, but the amount of fur which they are getting is increasing year by year and it seems not unlikely that they will prove themselves formidable rivals of the Hudson's Bay Company. The Hudson's Bay Company has hitherto felt strong enough to meet this competition without general raising of prices. The competition of the two companies has considerably improved the Indian's lot, as he feels that if not treated properly by one company he will be welcomed by the other.