

Title: Hudson Bay and Northwest Fur Companies; A Graphic Sketch

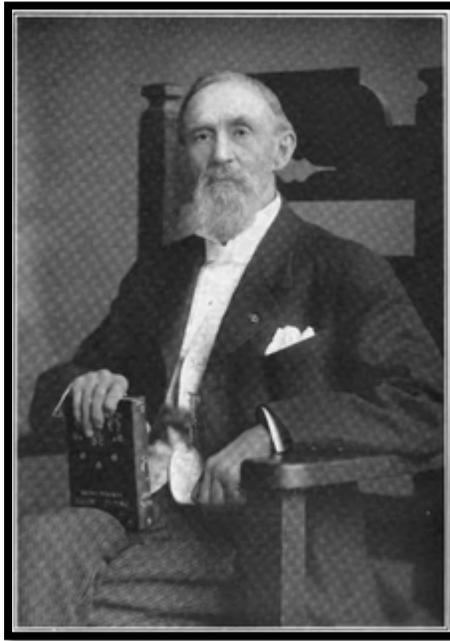
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Summary and Topics:

The Romantic Origin and Exploration of the Hudson Bay and Northwestern Fur Companies – the Grand Portage – the First Settlement on Minnesota Soils – a Mart of Trade and Frolic 100 Years Ago - The Grand Ball of July 4, 1800 – Fort William – Departure of John McIntyre – Last of the Factors – the Scottish Chiefs and Man Who Fought at Culloden on Our Northern Border read the subtitles in the *Bayfield Press* December 8, 1877.

Hudson Bay and Northwest Fur Companies A Graphic Sketch



By General James Heaton Baker
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“It is no more than 200 years since Charles II ceased toying with his mistresses long enough to sign a royal license to a company of traders, known as the “Honorable Company of Adventurers Trading into Hudson's Bay.” The splendor of the precious metals of Mexico and Peru had hitherto dazzled the eyes of Europe, and a territory which did not produce these was undeserving of attention. But royalty and beauty were wrapping themselves in costly furs. So Prince Rupert went to his royal cousin one day, and asked, and received the sole privilege of trade and commerce, and to have all mines of silver, gold and gems in that entire vast region, larger than Europe, extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from our own lakes to Hudson's Bay and to the Arctic Ocean. For this grand monopoly he was to pay annually to his royal master, the king, two elks and black beaver skins. But these were only to be paid on condition that the king came within the territory so granted, and as he never came, never an elk or beaver skin has been paid until this day.

The royal grant so made, remains and still covers more than 3 millions of square miles. Parliaments have winced about it, learned attorneys of the crown have declared the grant unlawful, but kings and Parliament have renewed the monopoly. By the intervention of the crown and new Dominion of Canada has been secured Manitoba, British Columbia and Vancouver's Island from the grasp of the Hudson Bay Company by the payment of \$1,500,000, one twentieth of all the land around each post. The vast area north of these, to the Arctic seas, still belong to the old monopoly granted to the king's cousin; but the company yet retains the right to trade even in the ceded provinces.

The charter of the Hudson's Bay Company was granted by Charles II in 1670. Under this charter, it had the right to build castles and forts, and carry on war and make peace with any non-Christian people; it had the right to make laws and ordinances, and provide penalties and punishments. These rights are still claimed by the company and are exercised where they can. With great energy and courage the company raised and palisade posts along the rivers and inlets of Hudson's Bay, and extending their operations of the South, gradually built up a colossal trade and fur. The

French, when in possession of Canada, destroyed some of these posts. When the French flag went down on the Plains of Abraham, where Wolfe and Montcalm fell, the company boldly pushed their fortunes to the west, and establish themselves in our own immediate confines.

As a competitor to the Hudson's Bay Company there sprung up at the close of the last century, an association of merchants of Montréal, dealing in furs, under the name of the Northwest Company. These companies were bitter rivals, and contested the barbaric field with obstinate persistence. Many were the scenes of tumult and strife between them. The feuds only ceased when Lord Selkirk came to found the Red River settlement. In 1812 he had purchased a large tract of land of the Hudson's Bay Company, on the Red River, and settled it with Scotchmen. This was the beginning of Manitoba. These settlers interfered with the company's trade with the Indians. In the contest which followed Governor Semple was shot, many of the settlers killed, and the rest driven away. Lord Selkirk asked for troops to preserve peace and order. Not many years afterwards, in 1821, these rival companies consolidated, and the Hudson's Bay Fur Company became the sole ruler of that entire vast domain which lies north of us, to the Arctic seas. And long years before the adventurous foot of the white man had pressed the soil where St. Paul now stands, and the Falls of the St. Anthony were yet a myth of the wilderness, the bold voyageurs of these aggressive companies, and preceding companies of less note, had found their way to the west end of Lake Superior. Thence threaded, the intricate communication which leads by lakes and streams and portage to Lake Winnipeg, and thence up the Saskatchewan, penetrated even to Lake Athabasca and on to Great Slave Lake. They had planted 100 trading posts. With military precision they had divided their vast territory into departments, and that along the north shore of Lake Superior was known as the Southern Department.

Of these posts in the southern department, Fort William for many years has been the chief. It is situated on the Kaministiquia River, about a half a mile from its mouth. This river flows into Thunder Bay through three mouths, and Fort William is on the north bank of the main or central channel. The banks are low and the soil is fair. Fort William was built in the latter part of the last century, but grew in importance after Grand Portage was abandoned, by reason of Franklin's line, which he dealt that locality to the United States. Fort William has tributary posts far inland, through chains of lakes connected by portages, the trails of which have been worn by the foot of the Indian in trader for long years, till the paths are deep in the soil. The power of the Hudson's Bay Company retreats only before the advance of civilization.

Fort William is its last representative along the shores of the Great Lakes. I visited there in August last, and just at a time which was an epoch in its eventful history. It is a quaint collection of antique, square buildings, with curiously peaked roofs. It covers the square of 520 feet, originally enclosed with a stockade. Two old-fashioned cannons, like watchdogs, guard the entrance. There is an old stone, fireproof building, which, in its time, has held furs which have brought fabulous sums. Furs which have adorned and warmed many a fair princess and proud aristocrat of Europe have been locked for a season in those moss grown walls.

It was here in Fort William as long ago as 1800, that the Northwestern Company held its annual meetings to discuss matters and arranged their plans for the future. For many eventful years it was the one little speck of civilization in the mighty wilderness. How many a good dinner has been given within its walls! How jolly the drinks! And here, in the cold winter nights, what stories of the wilderness have been told! Long years before Fort Snelling was built, here on our northern confines, was dispensed elegant hospitality. Here were brandies, oily with age, and wines which had crossed the salted and unsalted seas. These have warmed the social hour for the Anglo-Saxon Lord within, while the Indian serf scraped skins throughout, and packed peltries to be carried to the great fur fairs held annually at London and Leipzig.

And old as this fort is, there are still all about it the fragments of a yet older fort, and of winter roads into the great wilderness, which were the work of the adventurous spirits in the fur trade, about the time of the Declaration of

Independence. Fort William is no longer an imposing array of rampart and bastion. Here are only the hosts of the trader, the houses of the men and the storehouses. The palisades are gone; it is now only a trading post.

As you look at these antique buildings, and as you step in and meet the hospitable Captain John McIntire, the factor in charge, his hair as white as northern snows, with his tessellated cap and Scotch dress, and his round, ruddy face, bearing the mark of good living and good liquors you seem to see the whole pageant of this lordly company's history pass before you. For a quarter of a century he has had control of the post. The Captain has grown old and gray in the service of the company. He had built a house within the fort; he had gathered about him the luxuries of life; he reared a family; he had decorated his home with flowers; he planted a garden and made this spot an oasis in the wilderness.

But now comes the cruel discipline of this selfish corporation. Without explanation, from the headquarters of the company and Montréal, like a military order, comes the mandate at once for his removal and for an immediate successor. Some bad debts are alleged, but nobody knows; the company always sits with closed doors, in secret session. Captain McIntire, whose rosy face is as similar to the dwellers on the North Shore as the summit of Pie Island, is banished in his old age to the far off and dreary rocks of Labrador. With the departure of McIntire, Fort William practically ceases to exist. He is the last of the typical representative of that lordly company – the last of the barons. Fort William dies also of advancing civilization. A railroad, the Canada Pacific, is thundering not two hundred yards in his rear, and trade is seeking new and livelier channels. With the departure of McIntire, we may consign Fort William, and the whole machinery of the Hudson Bay Company, so far has it touched Minnesota, to the domain of history and romance, and to the airy fields of tradition.

Standing in the vestibule of this ancient fortification, you give indulgence to your thoughts, and seem to see the whole showy spectacle of the history of this wonderful company pass before you. Its daring adventure and wild romance challenges history for an equal. The nerve and courage of its bold voyageurs was never excelled by the men who followed Cortez to Mexico and Pizarro to Peru. Its object, too, was the same of theirs – the lust of speedy wealth. They sought gold; these men sought rich furs which are certain of being turned into the largest golden coin. The servants of this company were merciless in their purpose, and cruel in their extractions. In later years the neighborhood of civilization which has hung about them like police, has softened the rigor of their management. But in the olden time, far from the observation of the world, and accountable to no one, they pursued their purpose by destructive and despicable means.

The Grand Portage in Minnesota: I have seen some things within the Fort which are worthy of the observation of a Minnesotan. We tell of our early settlements at Fort Snelling, Mendota and St. Paul. I have seen documents which gave me authentic information of a settlement on Minnesota soil, full of strange life and activity, which long antedates these places in the quality of age. I have read the journals of one of the employees and traders of the Northwest Fur Company, who relates in his rude diary the scenes of enterprise and traffic which he saw in the summer of the year 1800 and, on territory now comprised within this state. One hundred forty five miles from Duluth, on the North Shore of Lake superior, and thirty-six miles this side of Fort William, is a bay called Grand Portage. It is crescent shaped, with an island at the entrance. There is a small band of Chippewa Indians now located there, known as the Pigeon River Band. On the left shore of this bay, under the shadow of a mountain, in the year 1800, stood a large Fort well picketed, that enclosed several acres of ground. It had three great gates, each surmounted by a guardhouse. Here were houses for officers and men, and buildings for storage and stores. There was a canoe yard containing one hundred canoes of all sizes. Seventy canoes were contracted annually for the commerce of that place. His diary notes states that on July 3, 1835 thirty-five great canoes arrived from Mackinaw, each carrying from 3 1/2 to 5 tons of goods and eight voyageurs to each canoe. More than seventy canoes had already arrived from the west through Rainy Lake, coming from Winnipeg, Saskatchewan, and even as far as Athabasca Lake. These were laden with furs and pelts. The thirty-five great canoes from the east had come with a year's supply of goods, food and liquors from Montréal, eighteen hundred miles away.

Grand Portage, at that time was the grand distributing center for all the trade and traffic of the Northwest Company in that part of the world. The proprietors and clerks, who spent the winter in the great interior, had come laden with furs. Other factors, with voyageurs and guides, had come from Montréal with the year's supplies. Grand Portage was the grand mart of exchange. Here for a fortnight each year was gathered the force of the company. The factors themselves were all present for the annual settlement of business. The narrator tells what a busy scene here met his eye in the depths of this great wilderness. Nearly one thousand white men were gathered there. Seven hundred fifty Indian women were retained in the employ of the company to scrape and clean the parchments and make up the packages of peltry. He describes it as all the air, life and activity of a busy city.

On the evening of July 4th, 1800 the diary states, the factors gave "a great ball". He says that the "great dining room was cleared" and inspiring music was furnished by the "bagpipe, violin and flute". Thirty-six gallons of rum were issued by the factors, which made the night hilarious. There were plenty of women, too, Indian women and "beautiful half breeds, who danced well". He describes it as a "famous ball", and they danced the "whole night through". One Indian woman got drunk and killed her husband.

Just when this great central fort was built, I have not been able to ascertain. But the scenes which I have transcribed from this journal took place twenty years before the cornerstone of Fort Snelling was laid, and thirty-eight years before the first white men claimed land in the vicinity of St. Paul.

I have hunted on the ground for a trace of this Fort, but find none. But there are remains of bridges built of cedar poles and logs across the streams, over the Grand Portage to Pigeon River; and there is bluegrass, white clover and Timothy there; and these things the Indians claim have been there a hundred years. I ascertain that the first road ever to built Minnesota was built there before the year 1800. It was thirty-six miles long, and extended from Fort William to Grand Portage Bay. There was a road also from Grand Portage, across Pigeon River, eight and one half miles, over which oxen with carts carried furs and supplies. At the end of this portage on Pigeon River, was Fort Charlotte. This Fort is gone and no trace remains but the bluegrass and white clover. Franklin's treaty in 1783 embraced this region, and the fur company gradually withdrew to re-concentrate at Fort William, which afterwards became the distributing mart for all the Northwest.

I regret that I have not been able to ascertain the date of the occupation of the Grand Portage as the mart of the great fur traffic of the Northwest. But I have seen a portion of a journal of one A. W. Henry, "a traveler and adventurer", who was at the Grand Portage in 1775. He described it as a great point of outfit and trade, and of "great hostility among traders".

This is the earliest record of its settlement and distinctive character as a trade center. Sir Alexander Mackenzie, the great explorer was there in 1780. It was then a great point of trade, also, in a journal of traders who had wintered at posts on the Saskatchewan and Assiniboine, in 1779 – 1880. I have also read the travels of Count Andreant, (sic) a Frenchman, who was at Grand Portage in 1791. He tells of the "great business transacted there with the far-off posts in the interior", of "rival traders, "and of much lovemaking and licentiousness going on there".

Grand Portage occupation as a center of trade, as early as 1775, and continuously so, with varying fortunes, till about 1805, when the consolidated fur traders withdrew into British territory, in consequence of the Treaty of 1873. This company itself was but a consolidation of several preceding companies. The occupation of the Grand Portage as a settlement and center of vast and daring enterprises over half a continent dates back more than a century, is therefore the oldest settlement on Minnesota soil. The settlement has been continuous to this day. About 1857 ago the government erected buildings there for the Pigeon River Indians.

One thing further of romantic interest I learned at Fort William; many of the followers and some noted Klansman of the famous Scottish Chiefs whose fortunes were lost at the memorable battle of Culloden, 1746, which extinguished the hopes of the house of Stuart, afterwards came over to Canada. They had participated in that bloody engagement,

and having lost all, and to avoid the fierce persecutions which followed, they fled to America. They were distinguished for their heroic and daring enterprise. They came to Canada and once sought employment in the adventurous schemes of the fur traders of the Northwest. This bold blood gave new vigor and force to the affairs of the traders. These men and their descendents were the intrepid voyageurs who pushed their fortunes to the Saskatchewan, the Assiniboine and Athabasca hundred years ago. The blood which flowed in the “Bands of Culloden” is the blood of the fearless Scotsman who dared warring tribes and frozen regions, which discovered the Mackenzie River, who first crossed the Rocky Mountains, and placed their flag on the shores of the Arctic sea. In the veins of the many half breeds and Boise Brule girls on the Red River, flows the blood of the man who fought with Lochiel and the Cameron's, near Inverness, on 15 April, 1746. The vast region of British America is full of the daring exploits of the men, through a wilderness of territory larger than all Europe. It only needs the glamour of the glittering pen of a Walter Scott, or the power which warms Cooper's thrilling stories, to weave their wild annals into romances as fascinating as Waverley, and as charming as the borders seems depicted in the Leatherstocking Tales.

I have read also in these old journals, how Cardinal Richelieu headed the “Company of 100 Partners”, in 1637, engaged in the fur trade in Canada, which company continued for thirty-six years, and which has had successors continuously, till finally emerged in the Northwest Company, which brings it to a time within the memory of men still living, – so that upon our border we are linked back to the days of Louis XIV, in France, and to the great Chiefs and clans of Scotland, who fought at Culloden, when the flag of the Stuarts went down forever.

When time and inclination permit, I may touch this subject again. [Contributed to the Pioneer Press of St. Paul, by Gen. James A. Baker, Mankato, Minnesota]

[Note from the transcriber] James H. Baker was a Republican politician who was Ohio Secretary of State from 1856-1858, Minnesota Secretary of State, 1860-1862, and served in the American Civil War. Baker was born May 6, 1829 in Monroe, Butler County, Ohio. Baker died at Mankato, Minnesota, May 25, 1913. This photo and information are courtesy of Wikipedia]