

IV.—THE FUR TRADE.

Historical Sketch.—The place which the fur trade held during the French régime in Canada, when for a century and a half it was at once the mainspring of discovery and development and the curse of settled industry, is familiar history. Later, the Hudson's Bay Company may be said with truth to have held the West until the Dominion had grown to absorb it, bequeathing to the civilization which came after, a native race accustomed to the white man and an example of organization and discipline that was of lasting value. The salient facts in the story are as follows:—

From the earliest times the Basque and Breton fishermen from the "banks" had traded for furs. As the French court demanded more and more furs, adventurers came for the latter trade exclusively. Pont-Gravé and Chauvin built Tadoussac in 1599 as a centre for this trade with the Indians of the Saguenay, and when trade routes were discovered farther inland, the founding of Quebec and Montreal followed. The French Government from the first granted monopolies of the fur trade, always on the condition that the company should bring to Canada a stated number of settlers. But settlement and the fur trade could never go together—settlement, by driving fur-bearing animals farther afield, made trade increasingly expensive—and the great profits of the fur trade, together with its freedom and romance, took all the adventurous from the rational pursuits of settlers. Trade spread west and south by the river routes, convoys bringing the furs yearly to Montreal and Quebec. The de Caen Company, in the seventeenth century, sent yearly to France from 15,000 to 20,000 pelts. "Beaver" was made the Canadian currency.

In the meantime, English navigators had been seeking a Northwest Passage to the Orient. By 1632 their efforts came to an end with little practical result. Hudson bay, however, had been accurately charted, so that when the first English fur-trading ships came some 30 years later, they sailed by charted routes to a safe harbour. The first expedition came at the instigation of Radisson and Groseilliers, two French *coureurs des bois* who had travelled in the rich fur country north of lake Superior. They had sought aid in France, but being repulsed, turned to England. The charter of the "Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay" was obtained in 1670 by Prince Rupert, who became first governor of the company (whence the name Rupert's Land). In 1676, merchandise costing £850 was sent to the bay, and the furs got by barter sold in England for £19,500. The dividend on the stock of £10,500 was sometimes as high as 100 p.c. During the struggle with the French, beginning about 1685, no return was made, but with the English victory the company resumed payments, usually amounting to 20 p.c. per annum. Forts were built on Hudson bay and James bay at the mouths of rivers; the company, as monopolist, waited for the furs to be brought to its posts.

With the Seven Years' War, the fur trade from the south passed out of the hands of the French, and until 1771 the English were busy re-discovering the old French routes to the West. A period of open competition followed. The discoverer of a new fur district was soon followed by competitors who undersold him and were undersold by him until some or all were ruined and left for new fields. The Northwest Company, founded in 1783-4, was a result of such competition. No capital was deposited, but each party supplied a proportion of the articles needed for trade. The Northwest Company pursued a vigorous policy, founding posts to control all the best fur districts. The Hudson's Bay Company felt the keenness of the competition, and was forced to abandon its ancient policy of waiting for furs to be brought to the bay. By 1816, the rivals had absorbed or ruined eleven