

CHAPTER X.—FUR RESOURCES AND FUR PRODUCTION

CONSPECTUS

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Section 1.—The Fur Trade

Historical Sketch.—The place held by the fur trade during the French regime in Canada, when for a century and a half it was both 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 that followed, 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 given in the Canada Year Book, 1934-35, pp. 343-344.

Fur Resources.—In the early years of the 19th century, the exports of furs from Canada exceeded in value those of any other product. The total output has not seriously declined and Canada may still be regarded as possessing, in her northern regions, one of the great fur preserves of the world. The rapid development of the country and the opening up of the West during the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries, together with improvements in transportation and settlement, meant the exhaustion of the fur resources of the settled parts. More recently the development of mining on a large scale over the Precambrian Shield has forced the trapper still farther north. Decline in fur resources has, however, been accompanied by increase in demand, the encouragement of fur farming, and the introduction of conservation measures. Nevertheless, the belt of northern Canada, which includes the whole of the Northwest Territories, the northern parts of the Prairie Provinces, and extends through northern Ontario and Quebec and into the Maritimes, remains one of the few natural reservoirs for fine furs. Minerals and furs will probably remain the chief resources of this vast area since much of it is unsuited to settlement or forest growth.

The fur bearers of Canada are mostly carnivorous animals, but two very valuable rodents are included, viz., beaver and muskrat. The largest fur-bearing animal is the bear—polar, along the Arctic Coast and Hudson Bay; grizzly, in the Rocky Mountains; and black, common in wooded areas generally. Wolves—grey, black, and blue are colour varieties—are common and widespread. Fox pelts account for more than half of the fur trade. Fur farms now supply nearly all of the silver-fox pelts, while the Arctic regions provide a large number of white skins and a few blue ones. The ermine, or weasel, is fairly plentiful throughout the Dominion and is found as far north as trappers are operating. Otter, beaver, marten, fisher and mink are furs of exceptional quality and beauty and are secured throughout the whole of the timbered parts of the northern belt. The mink is now being raised extensively on fur farms and the pelt of the ranch-bred mink is regarded as superior to that of the mink taken in the wilds.