

CHAPTER X.—FUR RESOURCES AND FUR PRODUCTION

CONSPECTUS

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Section 1.—The Fur Trade*

Historical Sketch.—The value of the fur trade to Canada cannot be measured on a dollars and cents basis. Like gold, spices and other highly desired products, furs were an important incentive to the voyages of exploration from the British Isles and Continental Europe in the early days of settlement in the Western Hemisphere.

From the earliest times the Basque and Breton fishermen operating upon the “banks” had traded for furs. As the French Court demanded more and more furs, adventurers came for the latter trade exclusively. Pont-Grave 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 to the fur trade, always on the condition that the company would 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 trading increasingly expensive, and the great profits of the fur trade, together with its freedom and romance, took the more adventurous-minded from commonplace pursuits of the settler. 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 enormous quantities of pelts. The beaver pelt became the unit of Canadian currency and was so used for many decades.

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 navigated, so that when the first English fur-trading ships came some years later, they sailed by known routes to a safe harbour. The first expedition (1668) came at the instigation of Radisson and Groseilliers, two French *coureurs de bois* who had travelled in the rich fur country north of Lake Superior. They had sought aid in France but, being refused, turned to England. In 1670 the charter of the “Adventurers of England trading into Hudson Bay” was obtained by Prince Rupert, who became the first Governor of the Company now known as the Hudson’s Bay Company (whence the name Rupert’s Land). On the granting of the charter a second expedition set forth, the ships well laden with merchandise to be used in barter with the Indians and with supplies for new trading posts.

* Prepared largely from previously published material in co-operation with W. M. Ritchie, Chief, Fur Inspection and Grading Service, Dominion Department of Agriculture, Ottawa.