2.2 Exploration and settlement

The Norse sagas tell of the colonization of Iceland and Greenland in the 9th century and they also record exploratory voyages further to the west and south. Settlements in Greenland were founded about 985 A.D. by Eirikr Thorvaldsson (Eric the Red), and some of these settlements lasted into the 16th century. Eric's son, Leifr Eriksson (Leif the Lucky) probably founded a settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland about 1020 A.D. Carbon-14 dates on the meagre Norse remains at the site tend to confirm this date.

Norse sagas and archaeology do not always agree, but history can be used to confirm archaeology, and vice versa, and some triangulation of this obscure geography can be established within which further information can be added. Certainly a great number of voyages were made by Vikings and, later on, by other Europeans, fishermen especially, of which there is no record. Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) on his first major voyage of discovery in 1534 found a ship from La Rochelle 100 miles to the west of the Strait of Belle Isle, and directed it back onto a course for home. The voyage of John Cabot (fl. 1461-1499) in 1497 is documented in English archives, but whether he landed in Newfoundland or Nova Scotia to claim land for Henry VII is not clear. Cabot's purpose is, however, like that of Cartier, clear enough: to find land that produced things of value. Cabot found fish on the Grand Banks, something which had been known in the western ports of England and France for years, but he did not find much else of immediate value. Cartier found Indians and *"les diamants du Canada"*, which later turned out to be quartz.

2.2.1 The search for riches

Canadian history thus begins as a quest for the riches of the New World. There are no voyages of discovery without incentives, and this particular stimulus is part of a continuing theme in Canadian history that lasts into the 19th and 20th centuries. Gilbert La Bine at Great Bear Lake in May 1930 was undoubtedly adding to our knowledge of Great Bear Lake but he was also looking for riches which in his case were silver, cobalt, and pitchblende. It was this search for economic gain that drove explorers westward in the 16th century. It was the basic driving force for the Spanish and Portuguese, for Cabot in 1497, Cartier in 1534, even perhaps for Champlain in 1603, many others after them, and most of all for the backers of these expeditions. No one would cross 2,500 miles of lonely, wild ocean in a small ship, no one would risk death and disease without powerful incentives. These dangers existed from the very first migrations westward in the 17th century, and it was not until the late 19th century that sea passages from Europe to North America could be thought of as reasonably safe and secure.

Many of the early enterprises of the French régime take their character from these fundamental conditions. That there were men of intelligence and high-mindedness who served New France, is, of course, beyond question – some of the Intendants, notably Jean Talon, and the Jesuits, are good examples and though the Company of 100 Associates had honest intentions they were frustrated by bad luck and the English – but most of the other early fur companies of New France, upon whom early colonization depended, fought in the court of Louis XIII for their monopoly control and made their money from the fur trade as rapidly as possible. They avoided, as much as they could, fulfilling conditions that they felt inconvenient or onerous, such as bringing out settlers.

The career of Samuel de Champlain (1567?-1635) illustrates this well. He was first an explorer with De Chastes at Tadoussac in 1603, then with De Monts in Acadia, 1605-7. When De Monts' Acadia trading privileges were revoked, Champlain returned to France, to reappear again under De Monts, to found Quebec in 1608. A new company was formed in 1610, and a whole series followed. Altogether he made some 21 voyages across the Atlantic, and died at Quebec in 1635.

Such vicissitudes illustrate the fact that the driving force behind these changes was the fur trade. This trade was mainly in beaver fur, especially the *castor gras*, prepared by being worn next to an Indian's skin all winter. Beaver was especially suited for the felting process available in France in the 17th century, and from this came the superb beaver hats so much in fashion in 17th and 18th century dress. It was in pursuit of the beaver trade that the French pushed far into the interior, to Hudson Bay, to the Mississippi valley, and reached the Canadian prairies by the early 18th century. This trade continued into the 19th century, moving farther and farther to the north and west. By 1808 Simon Fraser (1776-1862) had established fur trading