CHAPTER TWO

# The Long Struggle with Montreal

## 1713–1821

York Factory was "nothing but a confused heap of old rotten houses," reported James Knight to the Company's London officers in September 1714. The first Bayman to visit York Factory since the end of the French wars, Knight had come ashore to find that the jewel of the Company trading posts had been reduced to ruins.

From 1686 to 1713, Britain and France had been almost continuously at war. Throughout those years, Pierre de Troyes, Pierre d'Iberville and other fighting soldiers of New France had attacked Hudson's Bay Company's posts by land and sea. They had given New France almost complete control of Hudson Bay. The posts that survived sent few furs to London, and the Company's partners suffered through the "years of no dividend," which lasted twenty-eight years. By the time the war ended, the Company's business had dwindled to something much less than the founders had expected. Now the Company's hopes were reviving.

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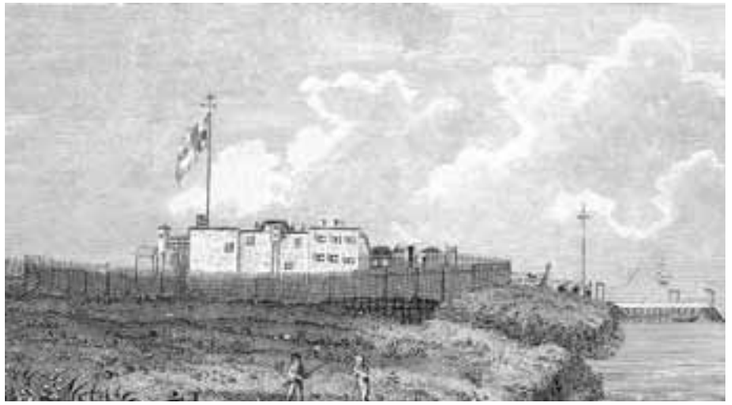
"There is nothing more persistent in the world than these claims of the Hudson's Bay Company," said Britain's envoy to the peace talks with France. The Company wanted its Hudson Bay trading posts back, and it got them. The Duke of Marlborough, England's greatest general and a former governor of the Company, had helped defeat France's armies on the battlefields of Europe. As part of the price of peace, the French King, Louis XIV, had to hand back the territories and Hudson's Bay Company trading posts which New France had held for twenty years.

The revived company shifted its business west and north, away from its earliest outposts on James Bay. In 1717, James Knight sailed up the west coast of Hudson Bay to open trade with the Chipewyan, a Dene-speaking people who lived north of the Cree territories. At the mouth of the Churchill River, he erected a small trading post. A few years later, the Company would replace it with Fort Prince of Wales, where heavy cannons loomed from stone bastions over the frozen tundra and the icy waters of the Churchill River.





*(Opposite) The Duke of Marlborough had been the Company's third governor. His victories as a military commander forced the French to return the Company's posts. (Left) Fort Prince of Wales as it looked and (above) as it is today. Built at the mouth of the Churchill River to protect the Company's lands from the French, the fort surrendered to a French fleet in 1782 before a single shot was fired. The stone fortress, which had taken thirty-eight years to build, was torched and destroyed by the French in half a day. Now only its blackened battlements survive.*

## Asleep by the Frozen Sea

For most Hudson's Bay Company employees, working at the Company's posts scattered around the great bay was more a test of endurance than heroics. Shipped out from Britain, usually from the north of Scotland, they signed on for periods of up to five years. The spring and summer months were spent trading with the various Natives who arrived at their posts, but it was the long winter, when the great bay filled with ice and the darkness seemed never to end, that the Baymen found hardest to endure. Their sole contact with the outside world came via the once-a-year supply ships, which brought in trade goods and mail and took away the furs and the meticulous accounts the traders kept — written in the dead of winter by flickering candlelight, using ink that had to be thawed for the purpose. Many of those who voyaged to the frozen bay to earn their fortunes never returned, and their graves can be seen at York Factory to this day.



*(Above) Coins and paper currency issued by the Company for use at its trading posts. (Left) The cemetery at York Factory. (Below) The main building at York Factory as it looks today.*



York Factory stood farther south, on the Hayes River. It had no stone walls, but it was the Company's single most valuable post and it grew into a cluster of some thirty storehouses and barracks. Year after year, it did more business than any other trading post.

York Factory's advantage was its location. The Hayes River provided the traders' best highway to the prime beaver country of the Manitoba lakes and the Saskatchewan River country far to the west. That ensured that York Factory would long remain the gateway to most of Rupert's Land.

Although the Royal Charter of 1670 had granted the Company a vast territory, York Factory and the handful of other trading posts at the edge of the great salt bay were still its only footholds in North America. Baymen rarely visited the interior of Rupert's Land themselves, and their Native customers far inland rarely came down to Hudson Bay or saw the Company's trading posts. Yet every year beaver, marten and muskrat pelts came down to Hudson Bay, while trade goods that came ashore at York Factory travelled far inland.

It was still the Cree and their allied traders who linked the Company with the inland beaver hunters. They had never accepted the Company's claim to own vast territories of northern Canada. This was *their* land, and the beaver trade was their trade.

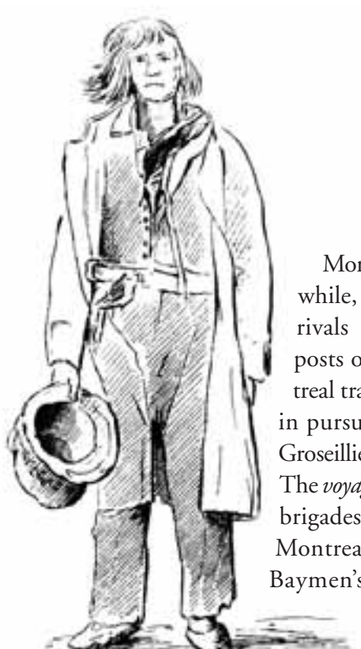
The Company, in fact, needed only a few dozen employees to manage its trading empire. Most of those came from Scotland's Orkney Islands, the last British stop for Company ships before they put out into the North Atlantic, bound for Hudson Bay. Young Orkneymen did not sign on to be wilderness explorers in the mould of Radisson or des Groseilliers. They expected only to spend several years working or trading at York Factory or Churchill or Moose Factory. In that role, the Company found its Orkney recruits hardy, diligent and loyal.

The Company was getting all the furs that the London market needed, and the shareholders' profits were steady. The governors of the Company were content to let others venture inland, even though some people in Britain complained that the "Company of Adventurers" seemed to be "asleep by the frozen sea."

### The Courage of Thanadelthur

Thanadelthur was a Chipewyan, part of the Dene-speaking peoples of the barrenlands north and west of Churchill. About 1713, she staggered, half-starved, into York Factory after escaping from years of captivity among the Cree, her people's traditional enemy. Governor James Knight wanted peace between the hostile Crees and Chipewyans, and Thanadelthur became his ambassador. She convinced the Cree and Chipewyan trading bands to stop fighting each other (below), and the Chipewyans began coming to Fort Prince of Wales to trade. When she fell ill and died in 1717, Governor Knight praised her as a woman "of a very high spirit and of the firmest resolution, and of great courage."

*(Above) Birchbark canoes on display at the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, Ontario. (Right) Voyageurs during a portage. (Below) An illustration of a typical Montreal* voyageur.



Montreal's fur traders, meanwhile, were happy to see their rivals staying close to their posts on salt water. The Montreal traders travelled far inland in pursuit of furs, much as des Groseilliers had done long before. The *voyageurs'* hard-driving canoe brigades carried more furs to Montreal than reached all the Baymen's posts combined. By the 1740s, soldier and explorer Pierre de La Vérendrye had built French forts almost within sight of the Rocky Mountains.

In 1763, after James Wolfe had captured Quebec City, France ceded most of its North American domains to Britain. The Company's governors hoped at first that the end of French rule might put an end to Montreal's annoying rivalry in the competition for furs. Instead, as British businessmen settled in Montreal, the city's fur enterprises become better financed, better organized, and much larger than ever.



The *voyageurs* pushed farther inland, coming ever closer to the Company's trading routes. The Baymen found themselves in a life-or-death competition with Montreal's NorthWest Company, which threatened to choke off the supply of pelts to the bayside trading posts.

In 1774, after a hundred years by Hudson Bay, the Company made a dramatic decision. The governors decided they must go head-to-head with the "Nor'Westers." That year Samuel Hearne built Cumberland House, far upriver from York Factory in what is now northern Saskatchewan. A forty-year battle — the Baymen versus Montreal for control of the fur trade — had begun.

## Samuel Hearne (1745–1792)

In 1769, stories of copper deposits far to the northwest reached Fort Prince of Wales. Samuel Hearne, a newcomer to Hudson Bay but already an enthusiastic snowshoe traveller, set out with native guides, moving slowly and following the migrating caribou. It was "all feasting or all famine," Hearne said. After terrible hardships, the travellers reached the Coppermine River and got safely back. Hearne went inland again in 1774 to build the first inland Hudson's Bay Company trading post at Cumberland House, in what is now Saskatchewan. The Company never found any copper mines, but Hearne's book, *A Voyage from Prince of Wales's Fort*, is a Canadian adventure classic.

*(Top) The crest of the North West Company. (Left) Samuel Hearne carved his name in the rock near Churchill, Manitoba.*

## A Diet of Pemmican

Because the *voyageurs* travelled light and fast, they couldn't carry much food, and they didn't have time to hunt for it along the way. Instead, in this era before refrigeration, they depended on pemmican. Said to taste like cold beef mixed with rancid fat and hair, pemmican was made of buffalo meat cut into strips, and then left to dry on a rack (right) or over a fire. The strips were pounded into a pulp, then placed in a rawhide sack made from the buffalo's hide — along with copious amounts of boiling buffalo fat and saskatoon berries, which helped prevent scurvy. On a typical trip, a *voyageur* would consume about a pound and a half of pemmican a day. It could be eaten as it was, made into soup, or covered with flour and then fried. Pemmican never seemed to go bad, no matter how long the trip. Indeed, there are reports of people eating pemmican that had been prepared more than fifty years before — without any apparent ill effects.



From 1774 to 1820, Baymen and Nor'Westers waged a desperate struggle for furs. Each side built dozens of trading posts. Rival posts confronted each other at portages and river mouths throughout Rupert's Land. Together the rival companies pushed the trade farther west and farther north. Nor'Wester Peter Pond reached the Athabaska lakes in 1778. Alexander Mackenzie, another Nor'Wester, travelled to the Arctic in 1789, and he pushed over the mountains and all the way to the Pacific Ocean in 1793. David Thompson, a Bayman gone over to the Nor'Westers, mapped much of western Canada as he opened new trading territories. At every step, new alliances drew new tribal groups into the trade.

Beaver were being trapped out in broad stretches of the fur trade territory, but the relentless race westward brought pelts in ever-increasing numbers down to Montreal and Hudson Bay. When Lord Selkirk, a Hudson's Bay Company investor, sent Scottish settlers to Red River, right on the North West Company's route to Montreal, the Nor'Westers reacted furiously. At Seven Oaks, Selkirk's governor, Robert Semple, and twenty settlers were gunned down by allies of the Nor'Westers.

There were too many forts and too many clerks, buying too many pelts just to keep the other side from getting them. Both sides were going broke. Finally, in 1821, the Baymen and the Nor'Westers reached a truce. The Nor'Westers had won most of the battles — their explorers had consistently gone farther and fought harder — but the Company had deeper pockets and more friends in the British government. It won the war. The arrangement they made was called an "amalgamation," but one of the Nor'Westers said, "This is not amalgamation, it is submersion." In a few years, Montreal's two-hundred-year-old fur trade was winding down. At last the company Prince Rupert had founded, truly ruled the trade of Rupert's Land.


*(Opposite) On June 19, 1816, the competition between the Baymen and the Nor'Westers turned violent. At Seven Oaks, Robert Semple and twenty of the settlers sent by Lord Selkirk to establish a Red River colony were gunned down by Nor'Westers enraged that their settlement blocked the canoe route to Montreal. (Above) Lord Selkirk. (Left) Prompted by their competition with the Baymen, Nor'Westers such as Mackenzie, Thompson and Simon Fraser pushed ever farther north and west, searching for new territories.*