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Canada as a Field for Historical Research

President's Address

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THE ANNUAL MEETING

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

CANADA AS A FIELD FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

By LAWRENCE J. BURPEE

It is doubtful if many people quite realize either the richness of the field offered in Canada for historical research, or the fact that it is to a very large extent unworked.

As to the field itself. First there is the story of maritime discovery, the voyages to the Atlantic coast of what is now Canada of the Norsemen, of the Cabots, of Corte Real, Facundez, Verrazano and Gomez, of Jacques Cartier, Roberval, Champlain and De Monts; to the Arctic of Martin Frobisher, Davis, Henry Hudson, Baffin, Button, Foxe, James, and many another down to the days of Parry, Ross, Franklin, McClure, and Amundsen; and to the Pacific coast of Perez, Quadra, Cook, Dixon, Duncan and Vancouver.

Then there is the long and equally fascinating story of inland discovery, through the two great eastern entrances, the gulf of St. Lawrence and Hudson bay, Champlain, Étienne Brûlé, Nicolet, Radisson, Marquette and Jolliet, La Salle, Dulhut, and La Vérendrye, in the south, and Hearne, Kellsey, Hendry and Cocking in the north; and later the journeys and discoveries throughout the west and north of Alexander Henry, Peter Pond, Mackenzie, Thompson, Fraser, Robert Campbell, Franklin, Back and Richardson, Simpson, Rac, Tyrrell and Hanbury, to mention only a few of the more outstanding names.

Then there is the story of New France, of Canada and Acadia under French rule, with its lines running far down the Mississippi to Louisiana; the relations, sometimes peaceful, oftener warlike, between New France and New England on the one side and the Hudson's Bay Company on the other; the political, social and industrial life of the people, their religious ideas, their intellectual development; their outstanding men and women, Frontenac and Laval and Talon, Montcalm, and Duchesneau and Denonville, Brébeuf and Jogues and Lalemant, Marguerite Bourgeoys, Madame de la Peltrie and Jeanne Mance.

The life of the people suggests the development of urban communities, and that brings in the founding and history of Quebec and Montreal, Three Rivers and Sorel, and a dozen other towns whose roots go down far into the early days of the colony. Most of them retain some of the atmosphere of old days, if it be nothing more than the speech of the people, but a few have become transformed into English-speaking towns, such as Port Royal, now Annapolis, Catarqui, now Kingston, and Detroit. A whole wealth of associations of course cling about such places as Quebec, Louisbourg and Montreal and ancient Tadoussac, memories of wars and sieges, missionary enterprises and heroic exploits, fur-traders and *coureurs des bois*, ships and sailormen of other days, priests and soldiers, merchants, fishermen and *habitants*, officials and soldiers, and mere citizens, all the elements of a community that was superficially so very different from the life of today and in all human essentials so very much the same.

From French Canada to British Canada, and from French Acadie to British Nova Scotia—a world of interesting experiences; the clash of racial antagonisms, different tongues, different religions, different manners and customs, a different point of view; British settlers, English, Scotch and Irish, struggling to adapt themselves to the novel conditions of life in a new land, carving homes for themselves and their families in the wilderness; the beginning of the long

struggle for self-government and responsible government; the opening up of pioneer settlements, the founding of new towns where yesterday was unbroken forest, the gradual development of municipal institutions.

Each of the provinces has its own history to tell, sometimes romantic, sometimes prosaic, but always with some points of intense human interest. Each story has its own dramatic incidents: the expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia; the coming of the United Empire Loyalists to the valley of the St. John in New Brunswick; the struggle between the people and the absentee proprietors in Prince Edward Island; the rise and fall of the Family Compact and the story of the Canada Company in Ontario; the Selkirk Settlement in Manitoba; the gold rush and the Cariboo Trail in British Columbia.

All things are relative. The magnitude of the Great War has made our own little conflicts appear trivial, and yet in their day and generation they were important. The causes, conduct and consequences of the War of 1812 are still well worth studying. So are those of the Rebellions of 1837-8 in Upper and Lower Canada, and the Uprisings of 1870 and 1885 in the West, and even the Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870.

The story of the fur trade, under both the French régime and the British is one of intense interest, tied up as it is with the history of exploration and western expansion. One follows the French traders from Montreal to Detroit, Michilimackinac, Green Bay and the Mississippi, or to Sault Ste Marie, Kaministikwia, the lake of the Woods, lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan, or into the vast regions of the north by way of the Saguenay, St. Maurice, Ottawa or Nipigon, to the lands of a score of different Indian tribes, and sees their canoes returning to the St. Lawrence with rich cargoes of furs and manned by crews that are practically indistinguishable though some are red and others supposed to be white.

One sees the traditions and methods of the French fur trade carried largely into the operations of British traders from Montreal. The policy of the North West Company was a blending of French enterprise and Scottish shrewdness. That is not to be wondered at, for among such names as McTavish, McGillivray, Mackenzie, Fraser, McGill, Mackay, Macdonell, McCrae, McNamara, McLeod, McLoughlin, and so forth, in the lists of proprietors and traders, we find Des Rivieres, Coté, Jobert, Campeau, Chaboillez, Montour, Pothier, and Larocque, and the lower ranks of employees, canoemen, etc., were almost entirely French or halfbreed.

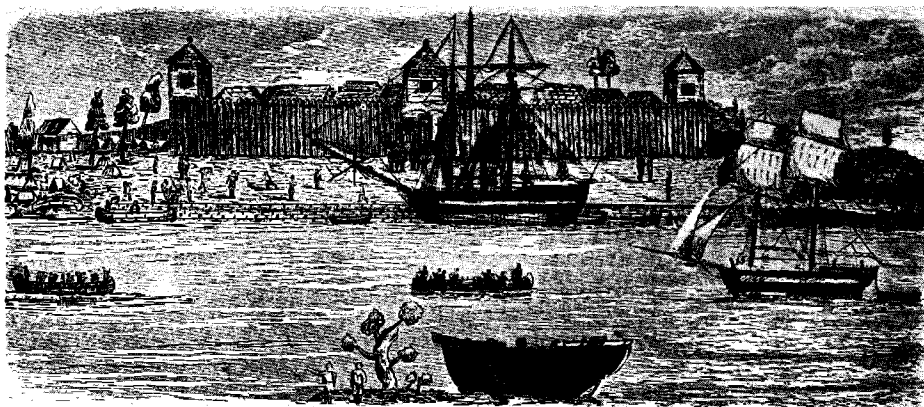
The story of the western fur trade has never yet been adequately told, and it is a story tremendously worth telling. We have had more or less satisfactory histories of the Hudson's Bay Company, and certain fragmentary studies of the work of the North West Company, with incidental treatment of the X Y Company; there are also articles and theses on the old fur-trading companies of New France; but the real story still remains to be told. It is so packed with human interest and dramatic possibilities, that one hopes that some day a really big man will undertake the task.

Then there is the story of transportation in Canada, or to take it in a wider sense, intercommunication, a many-sided and most interesting subject. One may devote oneself to transportation by water, or transportation by land, and today one can add, transportation by air. The history of water transportation takes one back to the earliest beginnings Canadian history.

The story of the sailing ship, as it touches Canadian history, is full of interest and romance. One thinks of the ships of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the ships of Bristol and St. Malo and many another port, that sailed up the St. Lawrence in the days of New France, bringing to these shores explorers and missionaries, statesmen and soldiers, artisans and farmers. One remembers the gradual development of our own shipbuilding industry, on the banks of the St. Lawrence and the shores of Acadia, and the glorious days when the single

little province of Nova Scotia counted over three thousand vessels, built in her own yards, and carrying our flag to every quarter of the seven seas; the days of the clipper ship, with its beautiful lines and almost incredible speed, built in the yards of Nova Scotia or New England by "Bluenoses" like Donald McKay.

And the history of inland transportation by water is equally fascinating, tied up as it is in its early days with the story of the Indian and his bark canoe, western exploration and the development of the fur trade, lakes and rivers, rapids and portage paths. An extraordinarily attractive book might be written around that single topic of the portage; what it meant to explorers and fur-traders and pioneers; its romantic associations with dare-devil voyageurs; its place in Indian myth and legend; the stories its worn pathway might tell of adventure and conflict, comedy and tragedy.



NORTH-WEST COMPANY'S SHIPS, AT FORT WILLIAM, ONT.

Then there is the story of La Salle's *Griffon*, the first sailing ship on the upper lakes, how she was built, the hopes that she was expected to realize, her one gallant voyage, and her mysterious fate. And the famous York boats of the Hudson's Bay Company; the *Nancy* and other notable schooners of the North West Company; the war vessels and the part they played in the conflict of 1812-14; and the development of commerce on the inland waters of Canada.

And that brings us down to the age of steam, the decline of the sailing ship and the substitution of vessels driven by steam. The story has never yet been adequately told of the *Accomodation*, the pioneer steamer on Canadian inland waters, built by John Molson and David Bruce in Montreal, and making her first trip from Montreal to Quebec in November, 1809. Nor do we know much about the *Frontenac*, launched at Ernesttown on lake Ontario seven years later. And to most of us the *Royal William*, built near Quebec in 1831, the first vessel to cross the Atlantic entirely by steam-power, is nothing more than a name. We should know more about the history of the first famous line of transatlantic steamers, associated with the names of three men of Halifax, Samuel Cunard, Thomas Chandler Haliburton, and Joseph Howe. And the *Beaver*, built for the Hudson's Bay Company, launched on the Thames in the presence of George IV, and sailing round the Horn to Fort Vancouver in 1835; and the *International*, pioneer steamer on Red river, which afforded communication between the Selkirk Settlement and the international boundary.

Nor should one overlook the story of Canadian canals and their place in transportation by water from the latter part of the eighteenth century to the present day; the deepening of river channels and of harbours, the establishment of lighthouses and other aids to navigation.

The history of transportation by land is equally important, and equally worth investigating. In 1766 Benjamin Franklin stated before a committee of the House of Commons that the only post-road then in Canada was between Montreal and Quebec. That was a relic of the French régime, having been completed in 1734. But long before post-roads were thought of our forefathers, or the forefathers of some of us, travelled from place to place over long-established Indian trails through the forest. Scattered through various papers in the transactions of historical societies, and in unpublished documents preserved in the National Archives and elsewhere is a great deal of material relating to these native thoroughfares, that in many cases became transformed into the roads of civilization.

In the latter days of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth, post-roads were built westward to Kingston and Toronto and eastward to New Brunswick. In 1794 Governor Simcoe, with the aid of the Queen's Rangers, made a beginning with that since famous highway Yonge street; and he also built Dundas street, from lake Ontario to the site of London. In time the intermediate links were completed, until main roads were available from Quebec to the Detroit river, and by way of Yonge street to Georgian bay.

The establishment of regular stages was the next logical step in the development of transportation, and before the end of the first half of the last century stages were in operation between all the principal towns of Ontario and Quebec, and in parts of the Maritime Provinces.

A romantic episode of the far west was the building of the Cariboo Road by Governor Douglas in 1858-65, to meet the needs of the thousands of people who were rushing in to the gold-fields. It was over four hundred and eighty miles long, and many miles of it were built by cribwork and blasting through the wild canyon of the Fraser, hundreds of feet above the river.

After post-roads and stages came the railway, and that opens up such a tremendous field of practical and romantic achievement that one can do nothing more than mention in passing the pioneer Canadian railway, built between Laprairie and St. Johns in 1835-36, a distance of sixteen miles from the St. Lawrence to the Richelieu. From this little road, with its diminutive locomotive and half-dozen tiny cars, to the gigantic railway systems of the present day, is a far cry, and the story of what has been accomplished in the interval, with all that it has meant to Canada, is one of vast significance and absorbing interest.

It is neither practicable, nor would it serve any particular purpose, to outline, however briefly, the many other aspects of Canadian history, political, economic or social, that appeal to our interest. Many of them have already been made the subject of scientific investigation by competent scholars, but one may say without hesitation that none of them have been even approximately exhausted, and a large number present an almost virgin field to the ambitious student.

Without attempting to suggest at this time what has already been accomplished in developing the field of Canadian history, or what may be accepted as reasonably authoritative studies of each particular branch of a many-sided subject, let me say a word or two in conclusion as to our principal collections of documentary material, at home and abroad, relating to Canadian history. Of course, the process of bringing together historical manuscripts and making them accessible by means of indexes, calendars, and the like, is still going on—is, in fact, hardly more than in its initial stages. Nevertheless, the student now has access to very large collections of documents in the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa; in the Provincial Archives of Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia, British Columbia and other provinces; in the manuscript collections of McGill University, Laval University, St. Mary's College, the Saint-Sulpice Library, the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, and elsewhere. Also in such

great repositories abroad as the Public Record Office, the British Museum, Hudson's Bay House, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and other great collections of manuscript material in France; and on this side of the Atlantic, in the Library of Congress, the State Library at Albany, the New York Public Library, and the Historical Societies of Massachusetts, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, and California.

All of which is merely designed to emphasize the fact that Canada offers an extremely interesting and fruitful field to the historical student; that he need not feel for a moment that those who have gone before have left him little or nothing to investigate; and that he now has reasonably accessible, with the aid of that invaluable appliance the photostat machine, very rich collections of original documents relating to practically every branch of Canadian history.