

To meet the increasing force of this powerful combination, the Hudson's Bay Company penetrated inland more than four hundred miles, in the year 1774, to a point somewhere in the vicinity of Cumberland House. Now began the great struggle for supremacy between the old British combination and the Franco-British traders of Canada: the one possessed of the strength and confidence which large dividends and established transactions had produced, the other having all the energy and determination characterizing the Canadian, born amongst, and thoroughly accustomed to, the hardships of Colonial life. As being firmly established inland, the Canadian traders more than held their own, and with them five thousand employés. Crossing even to the Pacific Ocean, they increased in strength and drew wealthy men to them till, in 1783—nine years after the meeting of the two rivals—when freed from the threatenings and assaults of the new-fledged Republic on the South, which in that year, by the great Peace of Paris, secured its independence, the Canadian traders combined into the celebrated "North-west Company of Montreal." From this time the trading with the North-west loses much of its romance, and settles down into the routine work of a Company. The trade was now beginning to have its effect. Many of the wild and daring men scattered throughout the country among the ignorant and degraded Indian tribes, formed alliances with them. From these unions sprang the large class of "Boisbrûlés," "Métis," or Half-breeds, which has formed such an important element in all the events of North-western history. The traders and hunters of the North-west Company were a promiscuous collection of these Half-breeds, Frenchmen, Highlanders and Indians. They consisted of interpreters, clerks, canoemen and guides, and made up the two classes—those who did the inland trade and those who carried from the meeting-place to Montreal. The former brought their booty

to the neighbourhood of Fort William, on Lake Superior, which was long the chief station of the North-west Company. They lived on the fresh meat of the buffalo on the plains, on the prepared meat called "pemmican" on their "trips," or upon the fish and game found in such profusion in the country they traversed. The voyageurs who brought the goods from Montreal by the toilsome route of the Ottawa, Lakes Nipissing, Huron and Superior were called "coureurs des bois." These, on account of their route failing to supply them with the requisite food, lived on the dried provisions they carried with them, and were regarded as less favoured than their North-western comrades; this class, consequently, comprised most of the "raw hands" of the Company. The winterers who, on account of their coming into contact with the Indians, were of a wild and roving disposition, gave the name to their associates, which still prevails for novices in the North-west, "mangeurs de lard" (pork-eaters). The departure of the voyageurs from Montreal on their long and perilous journey was a scene of great interest and beauty. Leaving Lachine, the dépôt of the North-west Company, in their slender canoes, they skirt the Island of Montreal, until they reach Ste. Anne's, within two miles of its western extremity. Laden so heavily that they sank to the gunwale, their canoes would rise on the crest of a wave and, guided by the expert Canadian, few accidents ever occurred. Their cargo was very general. For trade they carried "packages of coarse woollens, blankets, arms, ammunition, tobacco, threads, lines, cutlery, kettles, handkerchiefs, hats and hose, calico and printed cottons," and it is to be feared, a supply of the curse of the Indians—spirituous liquors. To this they added biscuit, pork and peas, for their own subsistence, and the utensils necessary for their voyage, but not a pound of useless freight. Early in May they prepared to leave Ste. Anne's. Probably few are aware