

The Labrador Eskimo.

HISTORICAL SKETCH.

THE SKRAELINGS.

A correct understanding of the present habitat and condition of the Labrador Eskimo is hardly obtainable without a knowledge of their past history and the remarkable vicissitudes of fortune through which they have passed. The wiping out by the combined whites and Indians, of the entire southern branch south of Hamilton inlet, which remained hostile and pagan to the last, and the careful nourishing of the northern branch by Christian missionaries, form one of the many paradoxes with which the history of native races in their relation to the whites abounds.

The first mention of Eskimo, supposed to inhabit the present Labrador, occurs in the Saga of Eric the Red, where the encounter of the Northmen with the Skraelings (which should remind us that the Eskimo were probably the first people met by the whites in America) is thus described:

"They saw a great number of skin canoes, and staves were brandished from their boats with a noise like flails, and they were revolved in the same direction in which the sun moves."¹

This is evidently an attempt of the Norse singer to describe something so unusual to their economy as the appearance of Eskimo in kayaks (skin boats). The sound of the double-bladed paddles striking the water might be likened to the action of flails; while the motion in the air, dipping on one side and then the other, would give them the appearance of revolving to an

¹ It is interesting to note in passing that the movement "as the sun goes" is characteristic of the turning of the dancers in certain Eskimo ceremonial dances, and that the actual words, "Turn as the light of day (the sun) goes," occur in one of their ceremonies. See Nelson, *Eskimo about Bering strait*, 18th Annual Report B.A.E., p. 372.