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THE FOURTH CENTURY OF CANADIAN HISTORY.\*

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MY learned predecessor in the chairmanship of the Historical Section of the Canadian Institute, Dr. Caniff, in his inaugural address a year ago, presented an able and earnest plea for the systematic collection and preservation of historical facts and relics relating to the Province of Ontario.

The subject is one which it would be a failure of duty to lose sight of. It should be continuously pressed and urged upon popular and official attention until the desired result is attained.

Not unconnected with it is the subject of this article;—the nearly approaching close of the fourth century since the discovery of the gulf of St. Lawrence. That event, I venture to characterize as the beginning of Canadian history.

It was a habit of our native Indian races, (borrowed by our woodland pioneers,) to direct their exploratory pathways from hill-top to hill-top. Each commanding summit enabled them to note the landmarks past, and to prospect for fresh ones in advance.

It is a practice which we may, as a nation, usefully imitate. The present is an epochal period of change and development in Canada. It is, moreover, marked by a collateral circum-

stance of singular interest. The approaching year 1897 will close the fourth century since the history of the region formerly known as British North America, and now embraced in the Dominion of Canada, was originated by its discovery by John Cabot on the 24th June, 1497.

It seems to be now sufficiently well established that John Cabot's voyage in 1497 antedates any other historically recorded discovery of the continental part of America; as that of Columbus, in 1492, resulted in the first historically recorded discovery of the island outposts—the West Indies.

It is necessary to emphasize the adjective *historical*, because of the existence of a number of prior but traditional or conjectural claims, more or less plausibly asserting discoveries prior to both Columbus and Cabot. We have the story, embalmed in the Sagas of the Northmen, of their mysterious landfall in the tenth century, somewhere on the New England coast; supposed remains of which near Boston have lately been reported upon by our learned townsman, Dr. Boyle. Another, and even earlier claim, extracted from an early manuscript, supposes a discovery of Mexico by an Irish monk, drifted thither in his leathern coracle, some time in the eighth century, and leaving traces of

\* This article was embodied in an address recently delivered before the Historical Section of the Canadian Institute, Toronto.