

THE NORTH-WEST COMPANY.

"Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord Ouest : recits de voyages, lettres et rapports inédits relatifs au Nord-Ouest Canadien. Publiés avec une esquisse historique et des annotations." Par L. R. Masson. Première série. Québec : A. Côté et Cie.

This work, indispensable to the student and to the general reader alike, consists of two parts: an historical sketch (pp. 1-154), and a collection of travels, letters, journals and reports hitherto unpublished, relative to the North-West (pp. 1-414).

In his preliminary historical sketch M. Masson has given us in clear, vigorous and unaffected diction the dramatic story of the rise and fall of the North-West Company—that powerful corporation which did so much for Canada, by opening up new routes to our commerce, and by extending the limits of our territory.

That company—of whose glories Washington Irving wrote in such glowing terms—who remembers it now? Yet the men who founded it, and who guided its enterprises, were endowed with qualities which would have won wealth and distinction anywhere. At last their deeds have found a chronicler, and a worthy one. M. Masson is no mere "laudator temporis acti." He does not bewail the past, but he does believe that but for the exploits of the heroes of an almost forgotten generation the Present could not be. And he calls upon us to read for ourselves, and judge whether he has done well to redeem their memory from oblivion. We are emphatically of opinion that he has done well in laying before us these records of the stirring past; and we can assure our readers that in the course of his narration M. Masson, although he exhibits but little love for the Hudson's Bay Company, and scant appreciation of the character of Lord Selkirk—the great rival of his hero, Sir Alexander Mackenzie—at least endeavors to hold the scales of justice with impartiality.

The North-West Company was formed in 1784. Its members were fur-traders who had come to the conclusion that the policy of bidding against each other for the custom of the

Indians was a ruinous one. Wisely they combined their interests, and not only realized a larger profit on their transactions, but were soon in a position to extend their traffic to regions hitherto unexplored. The "bourgeois" or "partners," were of two classes; the "Agents" who conducted the business of the company in Montreal, and the "hivernants" or "winterers," who superintended the numerous trading-posts echeloned from the Kaministiquia River to Great Bear Lake. The employees were classed as clerks, interpreters, guides, and voyageurs. The clerks managed the secondary posts, and received either a fixed salary or a percentage of the profits of the post. A general meeting of the company was held annually at "La Grand Portage," or Fort William, on Lake Superior, where for a few weeks these merchant-adventurers held feudal state, received reports for the past year, planned new routes, and fitted out the traders with merchandise for the ensuing winter's traffic. "On these occasions," writes Washington Irving, "might be seen the change from the unceremonious times of the old French traders: now the aristocratical character of the Briton shone forth magnificently, or rather the feudal spirit of the Highlander. Every partner who had charge of an interior post and a score of retainers at his back, felt like the chieftain of a Highland clan, and was almost as important in the eyes of his retainers as of himself. To him a visit to the grand conference at Fort William was a most important event, and he repaired there as to a meeting of Parliament."

The Hudson's Bay Company, whose charter dates from 1670, had contented itself with establishing a few posts near the Bay, thus compelling the savages to undertake long and perilous journeys of six or seven months' duration to find a market for their furs. The North-West Company brought the market to the very wigwams of the wandering tribes, and rapidly acquired almost a monopoly of the trade of the interior. And when the factors of the Hudson's Bay Company, in the endeavor to check the falling off in their