

artificial value given to some descriptions of furs, in civilized life, brought quantities of the most precious kinds and bartered them away for European trinkets and cheap commodities. Immense profits were thus made by the early traders, and the traffic was pursued with avidity.

As the valuable furs soon became scarce in the neighborhood of the settlements, the Indians of the vicinity were stimulated to take a wider range in their hunting expeditions; they were generally accompanied on these expeditions by some of the traders or their dependents, who shared in the toils and perils of the chase, and at the same time made themselves acquainted with the best hunting and trapping grounds, and with the remote tribes, whom they encouraged to bring their peltries to the settlements. In this way the trade augmented, and was drawn from remote quarters to Montreal. Every now and then a large body of Ottawas, Hurons, and other tribes who hunted the countries bordering on the great lakes, would come down in a squadron of light canoes, laden with beaver skins, and other spoils of their year's hunting. The canoes would be unladen, taken on shore, and their contents disposed in order. A camp of birch bark would be pitched outside of the town, and a kind of primitive fair opened with that grave ceremonial so dear to the Indians. An audience would be demanded of the governor-general, who would hold the conference with becoming state, seated in an elbow chair, with the Indians ranged in semicircles before him, seated on the ground, and silently smoking their pipes. Speeches would be made, presents exchanged, and the audience would break up in universal good humor.

Now would ensue a brisk traffic with the merchants, and all Montreal would be alive with naked Indians running from shop to shop, bargaining for arms, kettles, knives, axes, blankets, bright-colored cloths, and other articles of use or fancy; upon all which, says an old French writer, the merchants were sure to clear at least two hundred per cent. There was no money used in this traffic, and, after a time, all payment in spirituous liquors was prohibited, in consequence of the frantic and frightful excesses and bloody brawls which they were apt to occasion.

Their wants and caprices being supplied, they would take leave of the governor, strike their tents, launch their canoes, and ply their way up the Ottawa to the lakes.

A new and anonymous class of men gradually grew out of this trade. These were called *coureurs des bois*, rangers of the woods; originally men who had accompanied the Indians in their hunting expeditions, and made themselves acquainted with remote tracts and tribes; and who now became, as it were, peddlers of the wilderness. These men would set out from Montreal with canoes well stocked with goods, with arms and ammunition, and would make their way up the crazy and wandering rivers that interlace the vast forest of the Canadas, coasting the most remote lakes, and creating new wants and habits among the natives. Sometimes they sojourned for months among them, assimilating to their tastes and habits with the happy facility of Frenchman; adopting in some degree the Indian dress, and not unfrequently taking to themselves Indian wives.

Twelve, fifteen, eighteen months would often elapse without any tidings of them, when they would come sweeping their way down the Ottawa in full glee, their canoes laden down with packs of beaver skins. Now came their turn for revelry and extravagance. "You would be amazed," says an old writer already quoted, "if you saw how low these peddlers are when they return; how they feast and game, and how prodigal they are, not only in their clothes, but upon their sweethearts. Such of them as are married have the wisdom to retire to their own houses; but the bachelors act just as an East Indian and pirates are wont to do; for they lavish, eat, drink, and play all away as long as the goods hold out; and when these are gone, they even sell their embroidery, their lace, and their clothes. This done, they are forced upon a new voyage for subsistence."

Many of these *coureurs des bois* became so accustomed to the Indian mode of living, and the perfect freedom of the wilderness, that they lost all relish for civilization, and identified themselves with the savages among whom they dwelt, or could only be distinguished from them by superior licentiousness. Their conduct and example gradually corrupted the natives, and impeded the works of the Catholic missionaries, who were at this time prosecuting their pious labors in the wilds of Canada.

To check these abuses, and to protect the fur trade from various irregularities practised by these loose adventurers, an order was issued by the French government prohibiting all persons, on pain of death, from trading into the interior of the country without a licence.

These licences were granted in writing by the governor general,

and at first were given only to persons of respectability; to gentlemen of broken fortunes; to old officers of the army who had families to provide for; or to their widows. Each licence permitted the fitting out of two large canoes with merchandise for the lakes, and no more than fifty-five licences were to be issued in one year. By degrees, however, private licences were also granted, and the number rapidly increased. Those who did not choose to fit out the expeditions themselves, were permitted to sell them to the merchants; these employed the *coureurs des bois*, or rangers of the woods, to undertake the long voyages on shares, and thus the abuses of the old system were revived and continued.

The pious missionaries, employed by the Roman Catholic church to convert the Indians, did every thing in their power to counteract the profligacy caused and propagated by these men in the heart of the wilderness. The Catholic chapel might often be seen planted beside the trading house, and its spire surmounted by a cross, towering from the midst of an Indian village, on the banks of a river or a lake. The missions had often a beneficial effect on the simple sons of the forest, but had little power over the renegades from civilization.

At length it was found necessary to establish fortified posts at the confluence of the rivers and the lakes for the protection of the trade, and the restraint of these profligates of the wilderness. The most important of these was at Michilimackinac, situated at the strait of the same name, which connects Lakes Huron and Michigan. It became the great interior mart and place of deposit, and some of the regular merchants who prosecuted the trade in person, under their licences, formed establishments here. This, too, was a rendezvous for the rangers of the woods, as well those who came up with goods from Montreal as those who returned with peltries from the interior. Here new expeditions were fitted out and took their departure for Lake Michigan and the Mississippi; Lake Superior and the northwest; and here the peltries brought in return were embarked for Montreal.

The French merchant at his trading post, in these primitive days of Canada, was a kind of commercial patriarch. With the lax habits and easy familiarity of his race, he had a little world of self-indulgence and misrule around him. He had his clerks, canoe-men, and retainers of all kinds, who lived with him on terms of perfect sociability, always calling him by his Christian name; nor was there ever wanting a louting train of Indians, hanging about the establishments, eating and drinking at his expense in the intervals of their hunting expeditions.

The Canadian traders, for a long time, had troublesome competitors in the British merchants of New-York, who inveigled the Indian hunters and the *coureurs des bois* to their posts, and traded with them on more favorable terms. A still more formidable opposition was organized in the Hudson Bay Company, chartered by Charles II, in 1670, with the exclusive privilege of establishing trading houses on the shores of that bay and its tributary rivers; a privilege which they have maintained to the present day. Between this British company and the French merchants of Canada, feuds and contests arose about alleged infringements of territorial limits, and acts of violence and bloodshed occurred between their agents.

In 1762, the French lost possession of Canada, and the trade fell principally into the hands of British subjects. For a time, however, it shrunk within narrow limits. The old *coureurs des bois* were broken up and dispersed, or, where they could be met with, were slow to accustom themselves to the habits and manners of their British employers. They missed the freedom, indulgence, and familiarity of the old French trading houses, and did not relish the sober exactness, reserve, and method of the new-comers. The British traders, too, were ignorant of the country, and distrustful of the natives. They had reason to be so. The treacherous and bloody affairs of Detroit and Michilimackinac showed them the lurking hostility cherished by the savages, who had too long been taught by the French to regard them as enemies.

It was not until the year 1766, that the trade regained its old channels; but it was then pursued with much avidity and emulation by individual merchants, and soon transcended its former bounds. Expeditions were fitted out by various persons from Montreal and Michilimackinac, and rivalships and jealousies of course ensued. The trade was injured by their artifices to outbid and undermine each other; the Indians were debauched by the sale of spirituous liquors, which had been prohibited under the French rule. Scenes of drunkenness, brutality, and brawl were the consequence, in the Indian villages and around the trading houses; while bloody feuds took place between rival