CHAPTER THREE

Give Us Good Measure

1821–1870

It sounds like . . . music. How can that be? Everyone rushes to the gate of the lonely trading post that dozes in the warmth of a summer afternoon at the head of a lake in the heart of Rupert's Land.

Around the point, two canoes come racing, flying across the water at a killing pace. Nine paddlers in matching dress, singing at the top of their lungs, bring the larger one surging up to the dock. They fall silent, and from the canoe a bagpiper leaps ashore. Behind him strides a man robed in a magnificent tartan cloak with a tall beaver hat on his head.

George Simpson, the master of Rupert's Land, has arrived. He prowls rapidly about the post. He inspects the stores. He leafs through the accounts. He interrogates the chief trader, but he does not smile. This post is slack and sloppy, he soon concludes. Too few furs coming in, too much given in exchange. He thinks he will close the place.

Simpson has barely arrived, but already he is ordering his paddlers back to the canoes. They have come seventy-five miles since two o'clock this morning, he explains curtly. He wants to make it a hundred before they stop for the night. Simpson and his elite paddling team had left York Factory just thirty-five days ago, and he intends to be on the Pacific within a month.

In moments, the two canoes have vanished upriver. Only the echo of the paddlers' song remains to convince the bewildered men that the governor's inspection really happened.

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As far back as the elders could remember, the people had traded beaver pelts for clothing, flour, tools and guns that came from far away. Once they had traded with the Cree who lived downriver and travelled back and forth. Later, Company men and Montrealers had come themselves to build trading posts not far away.

(Left) A formal portrait of George Simpson, appointed governor of the Company in 1821. (Opposite) Simpson travelled up to one hundred miles a day during his speedy tours of the Company's trading posts.

Trading Pelts for Goods

The Company had come to the shores of Hudson Bay looking for beaver, and beaver pelts soon became the standard measure for doing business. Pelts could be exchanged for such items as guns, pots, copper wire and steel traps. Prices were quoted in numbers of "made" beaver (good-quality pelts from an adult beaver). Other furs were accepted, of course, but beaver was the standard — two otter skins were worth only one beaver pelt, but one moose skin was worth two. Contrary to popular belief, the number of points on a Hudson's Bay blanket (short, black lines found along the blanket's edge) do not indicate its price in beaver pelts, but rather its finished size. Points still appear on the blankets today. But the blanket was for more than sleeping. Often they were used for clothing such as leggings and mittens. Sometimes they were rigged up as temporary shelters and even used as sails on York boats.

(Above) Natives at a Company trading post. (Right) A selection of the goods the Company offered, including pots, rifles and the ever-popular Hudson's Bay blanket.

It was never just business. Just as the beaver and other animals were their friends and providers, the visiting traders were friends and allies. The people and the traders had always exchanged gifts before they exchanged goods. "Give us good measure," the people said. If the traders were not generous, or if their trade goods were not what the people wanted, there were other traders. Montrealer or Bayman, each wanted the people's beaver pelts so much that they had come into the country to ask for them, and they competed to give the best price.

Now there was only the Company, and the people found their partner growing less generous. The Company's new governor closed the nearest posts, so that the people had to carry their pelts greater distances. The Company told the people what furs to bring, and how many were wanted, and the trading posts offered less in exchange for them. It was as if the people were no longer partners in the trade. Their old ally was acting like a master.

The Company had always been more interested in shipping beaver pelts than wielding the imperial authority its Charter had granted to it. From the 1670s to the 1820s, it had had to work hard to win the business of its Native partners and to withstand the relentless competition from Montreal.

After 1821, the Company's control of the fur trade really did extend across Rupert's Land, and also north to the Arctic Sea and west to the Pacific. Across that vast territory, the Company had become the only buyer of pelts, the only supplier of trade goods. The Baymen were becoming what King Charles' Charter had called them long before: "true and absolute Lordes and Proprietors." The Company could no longer simply stick to trade. It was a government now, too.

Business still came first. After the merger with the NorthWest Company, the London governors intended to take control back from tough explorers and backwoods traders. They sent young George Simpson to put an end to waste. Simpson knew nothing of furs at first, but he learned quickly. He soon took charge of the Company's Canadian empire.

George Simpson's aim was to keep everything the Baymen did, even at the most remote trading posts, under the thumb of the London governors. To put his stamp on every outpost of the Company, he travelled relentlessly back and forth across the continent year after year, ruthlessly imposing his ideas and dismissing anyone who displeased him. "Worn-out traders are the most useless helpless class of men," he said coldly, "and the sooner the Company can get rid of them after their days of activity and labour are over, the better."

In the name of efficiency and profit, George Simpson closed down trading posts. He made sure that ships and riverboats replaced canoes wherever possible. He dismissed hundreds of employees and demanded absolute obedience from those left. He controlled how much fur the Company would buy, and he slashed the prices it would pay.

Simpson wanted to control the Company's Native trading partners, too. He swore he would rule the Native trappers and traders with "a rod of iron." He wanted them in "a proper state of subordination" to the Company. For the first time, the Native nations had no one else to sell to or buy from. They began to lose their share of control of a fur trade that had always needed them. Epidemics that had followed the fur traders in their wild race across the continent thinned their numbers, and they gradually became dependent on Hudson's Bay Company posts in ways they had never been before.

York Boats

Named York boats because their most common destination was York Factory, these sturdy double-ended vessels began replacing canoes in the early nineteenth century. Although they weren't fast, and they had to be rolled along on logs during portages, York boats could carry three times the cargo of freight canoes. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Company sent vast fleets, called brigades, to York Factory each year. As pioneers flooded the west, York boats began to carry more general cargo — including pianos and cathedral bells. The last one was built for the Company in 1924.

(Above) The Beaver, *a paddle-wheel steamer used for trading along the Pacific coast, visited small isolated inlets where sailing ships could not venture. She ran aground off Vancouver in 1888.*

Under Simpson's leadership, fur trading grew very profitable for the Company. But the Company was also governing an empire, and government seemed an endless headache for it.

On the Pacific coast, the Company ran a business that had changed greatly from the days when birchbark canoes paddled up and down the rivers from Hudson Bay. Here supplies from London arrived in ships that travelled around Cape Horn at the tip of South America. Even the inland shipments were carried by horse brigades, not canoes. By the 1830s, the Company had its own steamship, the *Beaver*, plying the inland passages of the west coast.

But settlement threatened the fur traders' world. American settlers flooded into the Oregon Territory. In 1843, the Company moved north to Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island, but farmers, fishers, loggers, traders, coal miners and gold seekers quickly settled in around the fur trade posts and routes. In the 1850s, James Douglas, the Company's chief factor on the coast, became Great Britain's governor of the fast-growing colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia. On the coast, the limitless Hudson's Bay Company trade monopoly faded away, until it was just one more business in a busy community.

The Company faced similar challenges in the heart of Rupert's Land. Around Red River, Métis hunters and farmers, English "half-breeds," and

(Left) Sir James Douglas. Shown here dressed as the British colonial governor on the west coast, he originally had been the Company's chief factor in the region.

John Rae and the Franklin Expedition

John Rae was trained as a doctor but made his name as an explorer. In 1833, the Company sent him to Moose Factory as the resident physician. But the young surgeon soon established himself as the most skillful Arctic explorer of his time, one of the few who learned from the Inuit and employed their methods. Rae was also instrumental in helping to solve one of the great mysteries of his time. In 1845, two ships had left England under the command of Sir John Franklin to find the North West Passage. The ships never returned, and search parties sent to look for the expedition found nothing. In 1854, Rae met an Inuk wearing the gold braid from a naval officer's cap. He told Rae of a group of white men who had died far away. During subsequent meetings, other Inuit gave Rae more objects, including a plate with Franklin's name on it. From what they told him, Rae concluded that Franklin's ships had been crushed in the ice, and the crews had abandoned them. They had then starved to death before they could reach safety.

(Left) Rae learns of the fate of the Franklin Expedition. (Above) Rae dressed in Arctic garb.

(Above) Lower Fort Garry, near modern Winnipeg, was among the Company's most important posts by the middle of the nineteenth century. (Left) This muskox skull, used as a towel rack, still hangs in the Men's House — the home for the unmarried men — at Lower Fort Garry today.

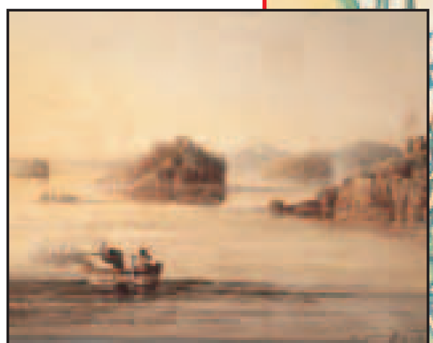
Lord Selkirk's Scots settlers had built a lively, thriving community. They wanted freedom of trade and they wanted control of their own destiny. Even many who worked for the Company were unwilling to have it continue to act as their government as well. In the 1840s, Métis leaders asked Britain to do away with the Company's claim to Rupert's Land. The country around Red River was Métis land, they said. The Company should own nothing but a few trading posts.

By the 1860s, the Company faced a challenge from Canada, too. The farmers of Canada West — what is now Ontario — yearned to move onto the fertile western prairie. Once Confederation was achieved in 1867, Canada was eager to expand its boundaries westward. George Brown, one of the Fathers of Canadian Confederation, wanted to abolish what he called "the injurious and demoralizing sway of the Hudson's Bay Company."

In 1869, almost two hundred years after it received its great Charter, the Company sat at the bargaining table with the British and Canadian governments and bartered away its monopoly of trade and its vast territorial domain in North America. The Company became what some of its shareholders had always wanted it to be: a simple commercial enterprise.

On the plains, convoys of Red River carts carried goods from Lower Fort Garry.

Fort Chipewyan as it looked in the early nineteenth century.



On isolated northern rivers, the Company carried goods by steamboat.


Empire of the Bay
1610 – 1870
Rupert's Land. Under the terms of its Charter, the Company was given control over all the land that drained into Hudson Bay.
Hudson Bay
Fort Resolution
Fort Smith
Fort Chipewyan
Fort Prince of Wales
York Factory
Fort McLeod
Cumberland House
Norway House
The Pas
Fort Garry
Fort St. Charles
Fort Albany
Fort Rupert
Moose Factory
Fort Chimo
Pacific Ocean
Fort Victoria
Fort Vancouver
Atlantic Ocean
Montreal
NWC Financial Headquarters
Fort William
NWC Inland Headquarters
Rupert's Land
Under the terms of its Charter, the Company was given control over all the land that drained into Hudson Bay
Legend
Hudson, 1610-11
Hearne, 1770-1770-2
Mackenzie 1789, 1793
Nor' Westers' routes
1670-1763. "Asleep by the frozen sea." Although bothered occasionally by the French, the Company hugs the coast, its monopoly secure.
1764-1820. In the face of stiff competition from the Montreal-based pedlars and, later, the North West Company, HBC expands inland.
1821-1870. After merging with the NWC the Company grows to its maximum geographic size.
Hudson's Bay Company forts
Hudson's Bay Company posts

A winter view of Lower Fort Garry.

The Company's headquarters in London.