

The Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba

Notes and Observations of Travels

**On the Athabasca and
Slave Lake Regions in 1899**

BY

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EX-FACTOR OF THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

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Notes and Observations of Travels in the Regions of Great Slave Lake.

At a meeting of the Historical Society, held in the city council chamber, on the evening of Tuesday, the 12th February, 1901, the following paper was read by Mr. W. J. McLean, ex-chief factor of the H. B. Co.:—

In order the better to convey to your minds an idea of the localities visited by me on my late journeys to the far north, though presented to you in a very inadequate manner, I will first give you an account of the route followed by me on my way to the remote region referred to.

From Winnipeg to Edmonton a distance of 1,032 miles, I travelled in comfort and ease, by railway. Edmonton is a flourishing town with several good hotels, especially the Alberta, and several stores, some of which are not far short of any in Winnipeg. There are also two or three banking houses. I think I may venture to say that Edmonton has a great future before it as a commercial centre. From Edmonton to Athabasca Landing, 99 miles, over a rolling country interspersed by small rivers and lakes, I travelled in a wagon. From this point I embarked on the Athabasca in a small open boat, and travelled 165 miles without any impediment, down that swift river to the Grand Rapids, justly so-called, as they are in the season of high water stupendously grand. Here on a small island on either side of which runs the raging rapids, there is a tramway of about half a mile long, built and operated by the Hudson's Bay company for the purpose of their own trade in the northern districts. On this tramway I had my boat and cargo taken over, and again embarked at the foot of the rapids, and proceeded through a series of rapids to Fort McMurray, a distance of 87 miles. From this point to Chipewyan on the Athabasca

Lake, a distance of 185 miles, the river runs smoothly to its outlet in the above lake. From Fort Chipewyan, three or four miles is travelled on the lake before entering the river, the first 50 miles of which above its confluence with the Peace river is called by the old voyageurs, Riviere de Roche, from its rocky character. After its junction with the Peace river it becomes the Slave river proper, a very large and swift river, on to Smith Portage, distant from Fort Chipewyan 102 miles. On Smith Portage, a distance of 16 miles, there is a wagon road, constructed by the Hudson's Bay company, over which they now do their transport work with oxen and carts. Formerly this 16 miles of the route was got over by following the river, and making five comparatively short portages, one of which, however,

THE MOUNTAIN PORTAGE.

was a particularly arduous one, owing to the very high and steep sandy ridge over which it had to be done. It was over this portage route that I travelled. It was not altogether new to me, as I had gone over it several times many years ago. From Fort Smith the river becomes wider, and runs without any obstruction to its outlet in Great Slave lake, a distance of 190 miles, making a grand total of 745 miles by water from Athabasca Landing. Along this river there are some very fine stretches of timber. The south and southwestern portion of Great Slave lake is, comparatively speaking, void of any particularly attractive scenery. That, however, is not the case with the north and north-eastern part of it. After leaving Fort Resolution going north for a distance of 60 or 70 miles, one enters an innumerable cluster of rocky islands,

and following the canoe, or the Indian route, one requires to be particularly conversant with the locality in order to be able to follow the proper channel, as in many places the islands are so densely situated, and forming so many narrow gaps of almost identical appearance, that only an experienced and close observer can follow his proper course, the loss of which might lead to much annoyance and even to serious consequences. As one travels north along the west shore of the lake and among the islands, the red granite ridges which stretch along the lake shore, with here and there crumbling frontages, gradually rise to an imposing height. Some of the headlands and cliffs along this route stand perpendicular out of the water to a height of 100 to 200 feet and I must admit that when sailing close in beneath some of those stupendous cliffs, I felt awestruck by their great and towering height above me.

In the face of one of those cliffs about 120 feet above the water, I observed a golden eagle's (*Aquila crysaetos*) nest, the young bird, not yet fully fledged, was sitting composedly on the brink of it, regardless of any danger to its safety beyond an apparent suspicion conveyed by the alarming whistle-like calls of the parent birds, which were soaring far above it. My guide, who was over 40 years of age, told me that since his earliest recollection, and probably long before, the eagle hatched there every year. All through this portion of the lake, it is very deep, and at the Eagle's Cliff, as it is called, and of which I have just spoken, the natives claim that they failed to find bottom with a sixty fathom line.

FISH IN PROFUSION.

About forty miles north from this point are the narrows where the Hudson's Bay Company many years ago used to have an outpost, and is known as Fond du Lac. Quite a strong current runs sometimes south and sometimes north, here. The water is crystal-like clear, and ice-cold, even in summer. I had a net set here one night, which was only 100 feet long and in the morning we got about 240 pounds of fish out of it, consisting of seven different kinds of exceedingly fine fishes. There were three species of speckled salmon trout, varying in weight from seven to

thirty pounds. This portion of the lake abounds with a variety of fish, some of which, owing to the temperature and the purity of the water in which they subsist, I believe cannot be excelled in any part of the world. I have stood on the rocks at the outlets of some of the many comparatively small rivers falling into the lake from the steep sides of the mountains bordering upon it, and watched the speckled trout in large numbers passing to and fro in their crystalline abode, and often thought how many of the sport-loving tourists in the old country would feel delighted to have such an opportunity for satisfying their desire for the pleasure and sport which the fishing rod and tackle can afford them.

These mountain torrents in their impetuous race down through the rugged rocky channels in which they travel to rest in the quiet level of the great lake into which they disappear, look in their mantle of sparkling foam like a narrow drift of snow, or a white streak running serpentlike up the steep sides of the hills over which they bound from the level plateaus beyond, and can be readily seen here and there through the sparsely wooded sides of the mountains at several miles distance.

AN ESTUARY.

At the mouth of one of the rivers to which I have just referred, there is a small estuary, which the Indians of that region regard with much veneration, as they claim they need not ever pass it hungry during the summer season. I have seen Indians (and did so myself) quietly approach this estuary with their canoes and set a net across it at the end next the lake, and then go to the outlet of the river, and forming their canoes into line, drive a large number of beautiful salmon trout into their net. This particular river is about seventy miles north of Fond du Lac, or the narrows, where Mr Waburton Pike wintered in 1889. The little wooden hut, in which he passed the winter was still a souvenir of his sojourn there.

I was still travelling slowly along the shore of the lake, which from this point lies in a northeasterly direction. It was now drawing near the last days of July and I was looking forward with eagerness for the arrival of the reindeer and caribou

(*Rangifer caribou*) from the coast and barren lands, to where they had gone in the spring to fawn, and to be more free from the pest of flies that would worry them to a much greater extent during the summer season farther south. My guide told me, upon my making inquiry, that the usual time for the arrival of the deer was about the 12th of August. The weather was beautiful with some days excessively warm; the nights were clear and balmy and the stars, which owing to

ONE OF NATURE'S WONDERS.

In this part of the lake and on a good sized island, stands an imposing huge column of red granite, rotunda shaped, and presenting, a perpendicular facade about one hundred and thirty feet high, and probably three hundred yards in circumference. On the top of this column of apparently solid rock, is a small lake, but which can only be seen from the heights back from the lake shore. No one has ever been known to get to the top of this wonderful structure by nature. The natives regard it as supernatural, and are inspired with a superstitious awe of it, as they believe it to be the abode of some genius which it is not safe for them to approach.

Now the much wished for notable 12th of August, (a notable day in the highlands of Scotland) arrived, and with it, in compliance with their instinct, the deer arrived also at the lake; and the Indians were at their different established points of vantage to meet them, and to give them (not a friendly secure, but a deadly) reception. I must, however, admit that they were all, men, women and children, overjoyed at (to them) the very important event, as they now saw in sight for them, both food and raiment, which cost them very little to secure.

SLAUGHTER OF DEER.

Now the deer shooting, or more correctly speaking, slaughter began in earnest, and the crack of the rifle could be heard on every side. Not only to the hunter and his rifle were these beautiful and harmless animals easy victims, but also to the old men and women, who in their canoes watch for and pursue them when crossing the lakes and the estuaries of rivers, and kill them with spears in large numbers. There is no provision by law for the preservation of these helpful animals, even to a reasonable extent. On their arrival the deer are in poor condition, and their meat is scarcely worth being preserved (smoked and sun dried) for food, but they are wantonly killed in great numbers notwithstanding; often only for their skins, which the natives use largely for winter garments and coverings, and at this time they are growing their coat of new hair, which as yet is short and fine, and more elastic and durable and resembling fur, than it is later in the season, when it becomes coarse and brittle. The fawns are as frequently killed as their dams, as their skins are



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the very short time the sun dipped below the horizon for a month and a half previous could not be seen, were becoming visible again at night. The remoteness and quiet solitude of the surroundings inspired one with a feeling that nature had ceased to exist, and the occasional shrill though melancholy call of the great northern diver (*Urimator imber*) (Gunn), was a relief to the wakeful ear at night.

much finer and lighter in quality, and therefore more desirable for garments for young people and children. The women dress these peltries with much skill, and make them as pliable as a piece of fine cloth. The male deer have splendid horns or antlers, especially when they are three or four years old, a new set of which they grow every year, in less than six months. They all, young and old, cast their horns in December, and the horns for the following year do not begin to grow until the month of April. During their period of growth the horns are quite soft, and are covered with a velvet-like skin. This skin falls off, or more strictly speaking, they tear it off their horns by rubbing them against trees and rocks, and this they do about the middle of September, when the horns are full grown. They then become quite hard. It was very interesting to watch those animals, of which

THERE ARE THOUSANDS

then marching in their annual tour. They scarcely appeared to take any rest, or halt, excepting for three or four hours in the middle of the night. They kept travelling in continuous bands along the lake towards its northeast extremity, and appeared to be impelled by some mighty power over which they had no control. They have regular and well trodden paths, which they keep without deviation, even when fleeing from their enemy. These paths in many places lead into rivers, lakes and wide bays, and it is surprising how unhesitatingly and fearlessly they take to the water and swim across. I have seen them swim across some arms of the lake fully a mile and a half to two miles wide, and as if guided by compass, strike the exact landing place and trail on the opposite side to where they started from. They are wonderfully powerful swimmers, and it takes a good canoe man to keep up with them. The fawns take to the water as readily as the old ones, and the icy cold state of the water had no influence on them, for they appeared just as lively and active upon landing as they did when they went into the water.

AT LOCKHART RIVER

at the extreme northeast end of Great Slave Lake, I camped for a few days, enjoying its many fine attractions. This is a beautiful place, with charming surroundings, diversified by high,

sloping hills, level, sandy plateaus and valleys, dotted with tall spruce trees and no underbrush. This is par excellence the place for a month's outing for the sport loving tourist, for here he can get fishing and shooting to his heart's content, and a variety of very fine wild fruit in great abundance. In fact the country all along the side of the lake which I travelled was teeming with a large variety of wild berries, such as the strawberry, gooseberry, raspberry, blueberry, cranberry, eyeberry and yellowberry, and so forth—pleasing luxuries in that distant country. Roast venison and cranberry sauce was an easily obtained dinner. The Lockhart river so far as I saw of it is full of rapids and some fine waterfalls. They also cause the destruction of a great many of the deer, as when crossing the river they are frequently carried over the falls and are drowned or killed by being dashed against the rocks. I saw a score or more of them along the river that were killed in that way.

OLD FORT RELIANCE.

Situated on a fine sandy flat on the border of the lake on the east side of the estuary of the Lockhart river stands the ponderous stone chimneys of the buildings which once constituted the now almost forgotten Fort Reliance, which was first built by Sir George Back's party, as a wintering station in 1825, when the pioneer expedition was made to the Arctic by the Great Fish river, since named Back's river, after the explorer. This expedition was in search of Sir John Ross, who was lost for four years in an attempt to discover a northwest passage, from whose journal during that long and weary time some notion of the sterling qualities of our sturdy race can be learned. It was on this expedition of Sir John Ross' that his nephew, Sir James Clarke Ross, more famous in Arctic and Antarctic discovery, discovered the magnetic pole. Twenty odd years afterwards, the same route was traversed by Chief Factor Anderson's expedition, which was sent under the auspices of the Hudson's Bay company in 1855, doubtless with a fond hope of rescuing at least some survivors of the lamented Sir John Franklin's party, alas! not to be realized, and Fort Reliance was restored by Mr. Anderson's party, chiefly to serve as a base of supply of provisions in case his expedition

should have to winter there. You will I trust be pleased to permit me this digression on a subject to the generation of Nor'-westers, now well nigh passed away; it was one of engrossing interest, and which I may be permitted to say is worthy to rank with the bravest stories treasured in the history of our people.

If the attractions and possibilities of this great region were better known to the wealthy pleasure seeking sportsmen and tourists of the old country and the United States, I feel sure that very many of them would come and spend a month or more of the summer season in it, which for its picturesque scenery, enervating climate and sport producing capabilities, is not excelled in any part of the American continent; and I believe the time is not far distant when many of the wealthy pleasure seekers of the old country and America, who spend millions on European travel, will make it an annual resort. There is no doubt a great future in store for that part of the country, with its enormous mineral deposits and great supply of the finest fishes the world can produce and so forth. I cannot offer to give you an accurate idea of its grandeur—it would require a student of nature to adequately describe it.

APPENDIX.

Sir George Back in his evidence tak-

en before the select committee of the Hudson's Bay company in 1857, stated that he experienced 70 degrees below zero, (102 degrees of frost) in January, 1825, at Fort Reliance, Great Slave Lake. Fort Reliance is in 62, 46, north latitude.

I observed but very few birds in the region of the northeast portion of the Great Slave Lake, such as the Golden Eagle (*Agulla Chrysaetos*); the Great Northern Diver (*Urinator imber*), Cowheen or Old Squaw (*Clangula hyemalis*), Green Winged Teal (*Anas Carolinensis*), Ring-Necked Duck (*Aythia collaris*), Canada Grouse or Spruce Partridge (*Dendragapus Canadensis*), Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus rupestris*, and three or four species of gulls. I had five (5) samples of copper ore taken from points on the northwest shore of Great Slave Lake, assayed by Professor Kenrick, of St. John's college, which gave the following results, viz:

Sample No. 1 gave 11.3 per cent. copper, silver a trace.

Sample No. 2 gave 15.2 per cent. copper, silver a trace.

Sample No. 3 gave 21.0 per cent. copper, silver a trace.

Sample No. 4 gave 16.5 per cent. copper, silver a trace.

Sample No. 5 gave 27.6 per cent. copper, silver a trace.

Assay of Galena taken from a point near Fort Resolution, G.S.L., gave 60 oz. of silver to the ton.