



Fort Gibraltar, from the Assiniboine River, in 1821, when the Hudson's Bay Company had taken it over from the North West Company. The original H B C store probably stood near the buildings seen across the Red River.

## The Company in Winnipeg

by Margaret Arnett McLeod

**T**HE story of the Hudson's Bay Company in Winnipeg is the story of a country's beginnings. Fifty-nine years before Winnipeg existed, the Company was doing business in a small log building not far from the Canadian Pacific Railway's station of today. This building had been their store on the east bank of the Red River at the mouth of the Assiniboine in 1814, but in 1815 it was rafted over and re-erected on the west side.

It has been generally thought that the Company had a store on the site of St. Boniface previous to 1815, since Donald Murray, a Selkirk settler, told the late Dr. C. N. Bell of its existence. Confirmation of this has been found recently by the Reverend A. d'Eschambault, who very kindly supplies the entries from Peter Fidler's *Journal* as given below.

Presumably written from Fort Douglas the entries tell of the Company moving building and business across the river:

*"July 1814—Last Friday Mr. Holdsworth late surgeon at the settlement went to remain at H.B.C.'s House across the river . . ."*

*"May 22 1815—The H.B.C. small trading House nearly opposite the Canadian House at the Forks [Fort Gibraltar] rafted down here to erect near the Settlement as it is not thought safe for a few men to remain in it all summer on account of the violent conduct of the Canadians [the N.W.Co]."*

*"2nd June 1815—Busily building the H.B.C. small House lately rafted over, at the angle of a creek where it joins the river about 100 yds above the Settlement that it may infilade [sic] both places in case of an attack by the Canadians . . ."*

The last entry supplies a very clear location of the Hudson's Bay Company's first place of business in what is now Winnipeg. The Company first thought of

locating at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers in 1813, when Hugh Heney, their agent at Pembina, ordered a post built on the east bank of the Red, opposite the North West Company's Fort Gibraltar, but it was not occupied at the time. So it is not unlikely that the "House" of the above items, in use on the east side in 1814, and Donald Murray's "store" operating there before 1815, was Hugh Heney's building of 1813.

The Hudson's Bay Company opened this post at the Forks in the midst of their struggle with the North West Company for the country's fur trade, and though they favoured the idea of colonists as little as their opponents, it seems that the hostile actions of the Nor'-Westers brought colony and Hudson's Bay Company together against a common enemy.

The events at the Forks during 1815 and 1816 are well known. They ended in 1817 in government intervention, in the return of the scattered settlers and the arrival of Lord Selkirk with his De Meuron soldiers. Peace, at last, seemed to be descending upon the colony. The settlers once more erected houses, the Nor'-Westers rebuilt Fort Gibraltar, and to the sound of ringing axes and falling trees, the Hudson's Bay Company built its first fort where Winnipeg now stands. Nothing further is heard about the little log store. It probably did not survive the destructions of the colony in 1815 and 1816.

The new fort (often referred to as Fidler's Fort, since he built it) was quite a pretentious one. It stood between Winnipeg's McDermot and Notre Dame Avenues East, about equally distant from Forts Douglas and Gibraltar. Donald Murray gave evidence about this fort also, and his statement to Dr. Bell is both interesting and valuable. He said: "This fort was built by Peter Fidler about 1817-18, but he went



to Brandon House in the latter year and it was first occupied by one James Sutherland who finished it in 1819. . . . Situated nearer Notre Dame than the other [McDermot] it was near the rise in the ground, and a few hundred yards from the river. It was about square, the principal entrance facing exactly to the point between the two rivers. At the farther end, opposite to this gate, stood the master's house, which was larger than the others, which ranged down each side of the palisaded enclosure, about four on each side. . . . There was a walk between them and the palisades, and an open courtyard in the centre. . . . I often slept at this fort and in 1818 when I went to Brandon House I started from it. I do not recall that it had any particular name other than the 'Company's Fort'."

This impressive place of business stood in a community of 222 people living in 57 houses, and Chief Factor James Bird was in charge from 1819-21. When the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies amalgamated in the latter year, and Nicholas Garry (with Simon McGillivray) came from England to initiate the necessary changes, he stayed at this fort, not at Fort Douglas which was the colony fort and seat of the governor. The governors were not strictly under the Company until the latter bought the Selkirk rights in Rupert's Land in 1835.

Garry's only comment on the Company's fort was that the main house was in "a very dirty state." Nevertheless, eight gentlemen dined with him there on the

evening of his arrival (on catfish, as food was scarce) and next day he rode to Fort Douglas.

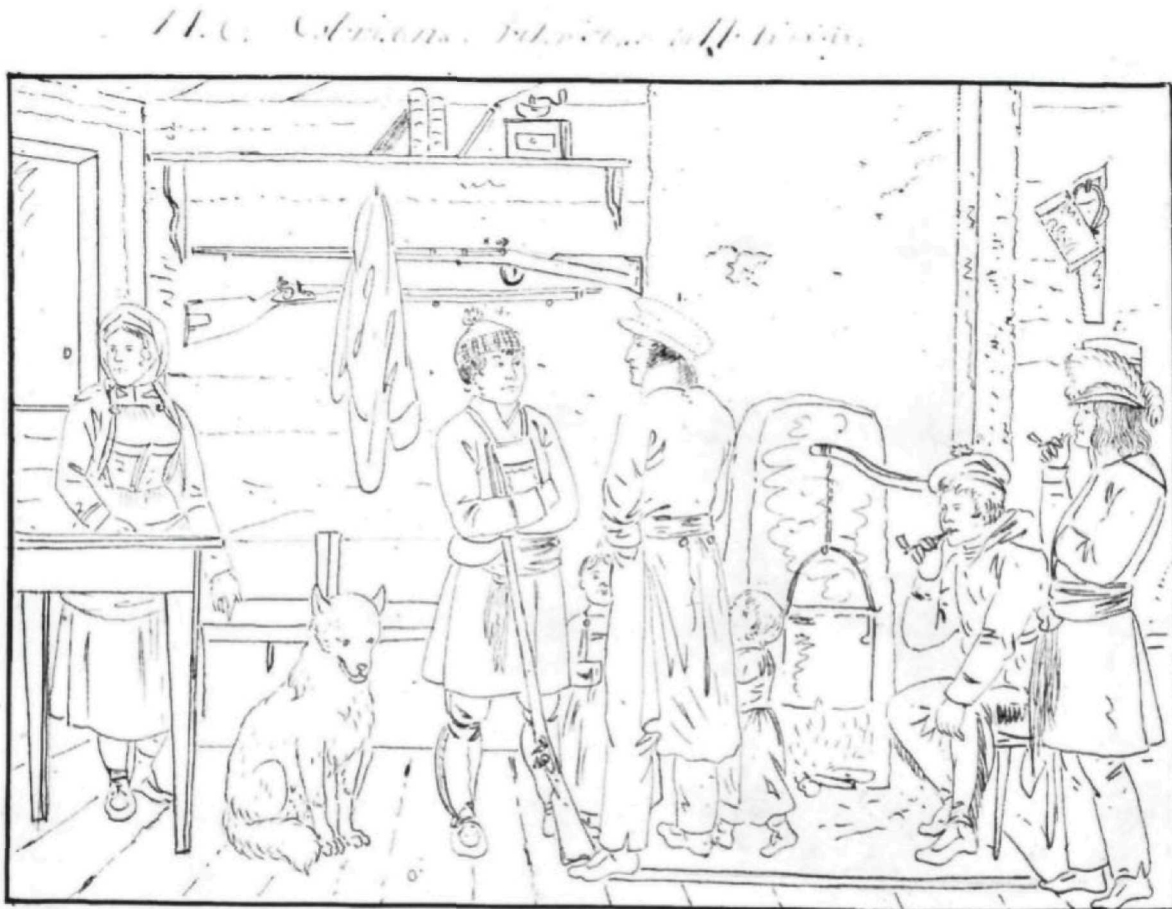
He reported that he found "the North West fort . . . in a better Situation than the Hudson's Bay House (it being at the Confluence or Forks of the Assiniboin and Red River), and there being the Framework of an excellent House" he suggested to Mr. Bird that he change to Gibraltar. This did not meet Mr. Bird's views, but as he retired that year Governor Simpson made the change, and had renamed it Fort Garry, by April, 1822.

We have to thank the Hudson's Bay Company that any accurate idea of Winnipeg's forerunner, the colony, in these years, can be obtained today. Their books recorded a payment of "six pounds nineteen shillings sterling," involved in the transaction whereby a Swiss settler named Rindisbacher painted the colony pictures which are now in the Public Archives of Canada.

Governor Bulger in 1822, gave a depressing account of Fort Douglas (sometimes used to store Company goods), but the Swiss artist in 1823 painted a brighter picture. However, the colony store there was now closed and Fort Garry alone served the people. In 1825 Fort Douglas was sold and Governor Pelly (Bulger's successor) turned to enlarging his new headquarters, Fort Garry. This change brought colony and Company into closer contact.

The first Fort Garry was the crude product of a new country but naturally it was idealized because of its importance. Alex. Ross, the historian, arriving from

Interior of a Red River settler's house. This and the picture of Fort Gibraltar were both probably done by Peter Rindisbacher. They are now in the Public Archives of Canada.







Fort Garry in 1851. From a hitherto unpublished water colour by William Armstrong. By courtesy of Mrs. Douglas McMurray.

the Pacific coast and approaching it on horseback on a July evening in 1825, wrote: "I was anxious to see the place, I had heard so much about it, but I must confess that I felt disappointed. Instead of a place walled and fortified as I had expected, I saw nothing but a few wooden houses huddled together . . . used as dwellings and warehouses. . . . Nor was the Governor's residence anything more in its outward appearance than the cottage of a humble farmer, who might be able to spend fifty pounds a year . . ." Yet, even in his disappointment Ross saw the place as "the metropolis of the country" and evidence of its "settled and tranquil state."

Then once again the settlement was wiped out. It was the flood of 1826, and Fort Douglas and the Company fort which Fidler had built were swept away. Fort Garry, though it still stood, suffered considerable damage, for John Pritchard was afterwards granted "all the ruins of Fort Garry . . . wherever found within the District of Assiniboia."

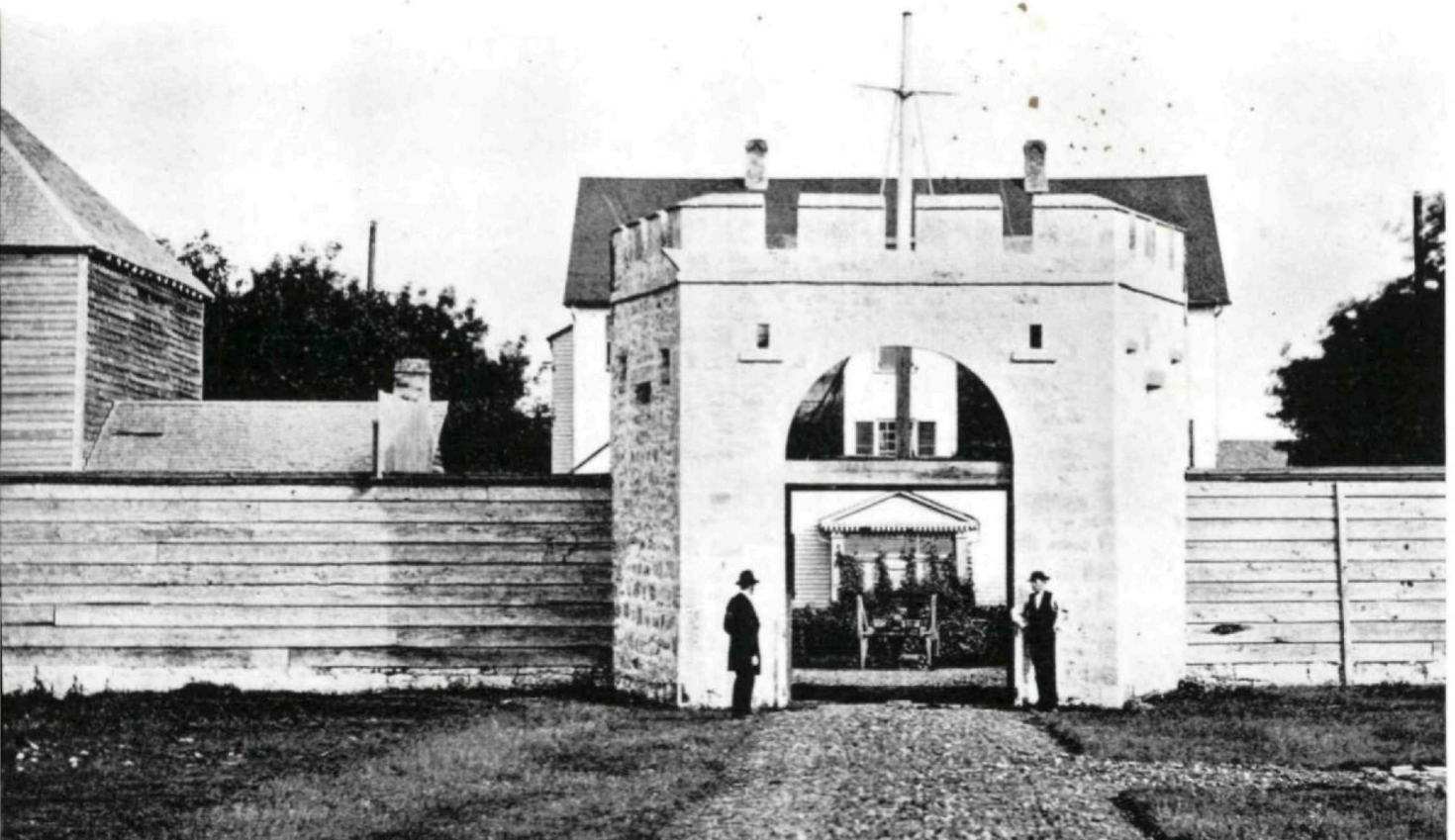
In 1831, the Company decided to abandon the now dilapidated fort, and started to build Lower Fort Garry on higher ground down past St. Andrew's Rapids. In the meantime, however, it had been decided to

retain the chief depot at the Forks "as the natural centre of the fur trade," so in 1835, Chief Factor Alex. Christie began a new fort just west of the old one. This was the Upper Fort Garry which stood in Winnipeg until 1882. The abandoned Fort Garry later went down in the flood of 1852.

The new fort was 240 by 280 feet with walls of limestone and four large bastions at the corners. In the 'fifties the north wall was removed and the fort was extended in that direction, the new walls being of squared oak timbers. The governor's house was in the extension, the building which was later Manitoba's Government House. It was at this time that the Fort Garry gateway, which still stands, was erected. Chief Factor A. H. Murray is supposed to have sketched the design for the officer in charge, on the back of an envelope.

The counting room of this fort was described by R. M. Ballantyne, who was a clerk there. It was an office by day, furnished with "two large desks and several very tall stools, besides sundry ink-bottles, rulers, books, and sheets of blotting-paper." But at night it was transformed, for here the clerks gathered for their fun around the huge fireplace in one corner,

The north gate and walls of squared logs, with the Governor's house beyond.





piled with blazing logs on end. Their three bedrooms, with doors always open, gave on this room, and lent a background of colour with scarlet sashes, bright hued raiment and gay shot-belts hanging on nails driven into the walls.

The fort was busy by day with the outfitting of boat brigade, buffalo hunt or Northern packet; with the comings and goings of settlers, canoe men, freighters and Metis hunters. Visitors became more frequent. Big game hunters, scientists and travellers formed a body of guests at which the clerks were inclined to grumble, but who always spoke afterwards of the unbounded hospitality of the fort.

Military were stationed there from time to time, with clank of sword, clatter of hoofs and much added gaiety; the 6th Royal Regiment of Foot who came in 1846 and stayed two years, seventy pensioners in 1848, and a Company of Royal Canadian Rifles in 1857 who remained four years.

From 1857 Fort Garry witnessed swift changes—the whistle of a steamboat on the river, extended postal communication and the publication of a newspaper—and it gained importance through becoming the residence of the governor of all Rupert's Land. In 1863, a group of free traders' buildings on its northern border began to call itself Winnipeg, and to meet this new development, the Company, in 1867, opened a branch store among them, in the best building there. It was on the present Fort Street. Later it was closed and one opened in St. Boniface.

The Red River Settlement in its last decade was still a primitive community, but Charles Mair, newly come to the country, after dining at the fort one evening in 1868, wrote: "Just fancy what we had at a dinner party! Oyster soup, white fish, roast beef, roast prairie chicken, green peas, tomatoes stewed, stewed gooseberries, plum pudding, blanc mange, raisins, nuts of all kinds, coffee, port and sherry, brandy punch and cigars, concluding with whist until four o'clock a.m. There is a dinner for you, in the heart of a continent, with Indian skin lodges within a stone's throw!"

The scene changed with the gathering storm of 1869. There was the resistance of the Metis to the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada, and Fort Garry was occupied by Louis Riel and his soldiers. However, Colonel Wolseley with his troops, marching up the muddy road to the fort in a driving rain on August 24, 1870, found it empty; Riel and O'Donoghue had fled at their approach.

On Manitoba's creation as a province in that year, Fort Garry had been named as its capital and it functioned as such for some years. It remained the seat of the governor until 1878. Governor A. G. Archibald arrived soon after Colonel Wolseley and his troops, took up residence at the fort, and the new era began.

In the next two years came weekly mail service, a stage line south and the telegraph. Seven stern-wheelers on the Red River ended ox-cart freighting south, the first immigrants arrived from Ontario, and isolation was almost over. The year 1873, which saw the last Indian dog feast at Point Douglas, saw also the quickly growing cluster of buildings at the corner of Portage Avenue and Main Street incorporated as Winnipeg, with a population of almost 1500.

The Company's sale of Rupert's Land to Canada in 1870 had brought into being its Land Department and lots were now auctioned off to eager purchasers. However, the Company presented to Winnipeg a site for its first public school.

The fort by this time had thirteen buildings inside the walls and some few outside, with a "steamboat warehouse"—an up-to-the-minute addition—at the water's edge. A large mill was soon to follow. A considerable number of settlers were now coming in from the East by the Dawson Road and the Company kept pace with the growing population. In 1874, the front wall of the fort was pierced for a new pedestrian gateway, new sidewalks were laid within the fort and the retail saleshop or store was enlarged. Customers at the store always had been required to bring their own wrappings, but just when the Company ceased their picturesque parcelling of goods, in the customary canvas sacks tied at intervals to separate sugar, tea, oatmeal, etc., is not known.

Lady Dufferin, who came west with her husband, Lord Dufferin, Governor-General of Canada, in 1877, was an interested visitor on a tour of the fort. "The shop is a very good one," she related, "and I purchased a hat for my rough expeditions, and a jacket of white cariboo skin, embroidered in silk by the Indians. We also saw the furs. The room full of buffalo robes smelt horribly; but I bore it, being determined to see all I could. . . . Another place was full of various skins; wolf, grizzly bear, foxes of all sorts, etc. . . ."

She also described a ball given at Government House, within the fort, by Governor Morris. Fresh fruit was imported for the supper "as none grows here yet. . . . The ladies [were] well dressed and the

Interior of the fort from the south (river) gate. Bachelors' Hall is in the centre. The guns are now at Lower Fort Garry.





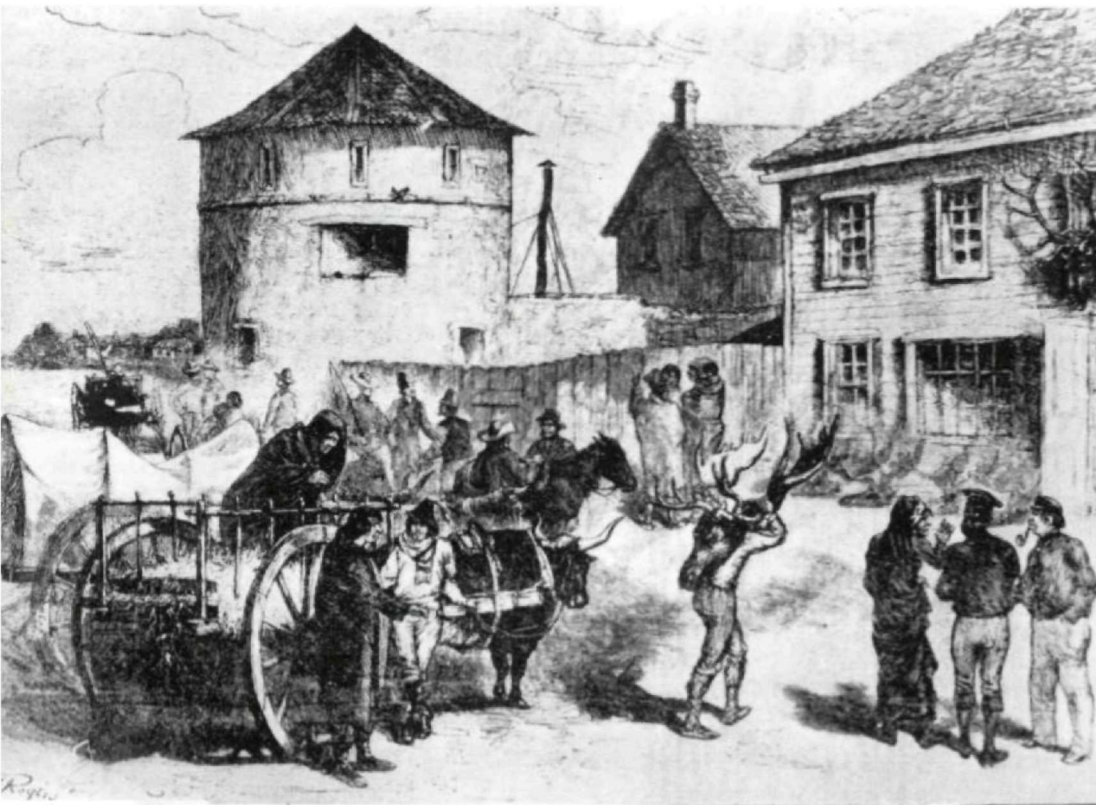
dancing just as at Ottawa or London. . . . Six years ago," she commented, "at a ball here, ladies would have come in moccasins and danced nothing but the Red River Jig . . . which shows how quickly outside ideas make their way in. . ."

Winnipeg had shipped its first wheat and the wealth of Red River soil was making it famous when in 1878 a railway from St. Paul to St. Boniface finally ended the country's remoteness. Tales of the marvellous returns to be had, from merely putting the plough to the sod, were spreading throughout Canada and brought literally hordes of people to Manitoba. The ferry across the Assiniboine that landed its passengers below the walls of Fort Garry was replaced in 1880 by a long iron bridge, in line with the river gate. In order to reach Main Street from the bridge, travellers had to make a slight detour around the southeast corner. The stone walls and bastions were demolished and replaced by a wooden fence, and then in order to save a few seconds Main Street was run right through the fort.

In doing this there was no need to demolish more than three or four buildings. But with a ruthless disregard for historical values, the whole fort was destroyed except for the stone gate which still stands. How much use has been made of the space thus created is evident today. It is still a vacant field.

Evidently no one saw what a visitor described in *Harper's Magazine* in 1880; that old Fort Garry was "the most interesting object in Winnipeg . . . the only thing which has anything picturesque about it," standing "well up above the swift muddy current of the Assiniboine with an air of antiquity and romance about the rough gray wall," the "low gateway," the "rude turrets," and its Company flag floating above the little quadrangle where for so many years "white man and red man had met to barter the products of Europe for the skins of the wild north land."

The flag was taken down to float over the Company's new era, over the fine new store erected in 1881 on Main Street, near which the buffalo trail to the



The retail store at Fort Garry in 1871, after the stone walls in front of it had been taken down to provide easier access.

The Main Street store, which served the Winnipeg retail trade for forty-five years.







The Company's department store in Winnipeg, opened in 1926

river was still to be seen. The fort bell (now in the Company's museum) was hung in the store to continue its work of summoning Company employees to work and rest, but after a time modern business complained of its noise and it was taken down. In 1882 electric light for Winnipeg streets was generated at the Company's mill, in which the store with other business places finally shared.

At this time many shoddy goods were being rushed into the country to cope with unprecedented demand, but the first Main Street store is remembered by older people today as always to be depended upon for quality. The dress goods department in the later enlarged red brick store, with bolts of goods displayed on the carpeted floors in artistic groupings and drapings, is also recalled by women who, with a family of any size, employed a seamstress for weeks on end at each change of season.

Various additions were made to this store from time to time and business was carried on there until 1926, when the present large department store was opened on Portage Avenue at Memorial Boulevard.

A Canadian advisory committee was set up in 1912 to help in directing the policies of the Company in Canada, and this committee, which now also directs all operations in this country, assumed its present powers in 1930.

Hudson's Bay House, the home of the Canadian Committee, Fur Trade, Land, Wholesale and Retail Stores Departments, was erected in 1912. In 1919 a tea and coffee plant was installed, where Fort Garry and Fort York tea and coffee are manufactured. Here also is located the Winnipeg Fur Trade Depot which, with the Montreal and Edmonton Depots, supplies all the fur trade posts with their trade goods. A trip through the depot discloses what is being demanded today by the Indians and Eskimos in exchange for their furs, and the list runs the gamut from snow knives and beads to silk hose and mechanical toys.

Hudson's Bay House, the Company's Canadian headquarters, where all these interests are centred, stands on part of the site of the last Fort Garry, and on the same "lookout point" between the Red and Assiniboine rivers, where the older forts stood.

The retail stores of the Company have now superseded the Fur Trade in commercial importance, and of these, the Winnipeg store is the largest. It also houses the Company's museum, the only fur trade museum in Canada. Thus the retail trade in Winnipeg, which the Company began in the little log building near Fort Douglas, has been carried on through Fidler's fort, the trading store and saleshop at Fort Garry and the Main Street store, to the present magnificent structure on Portage Avenue.