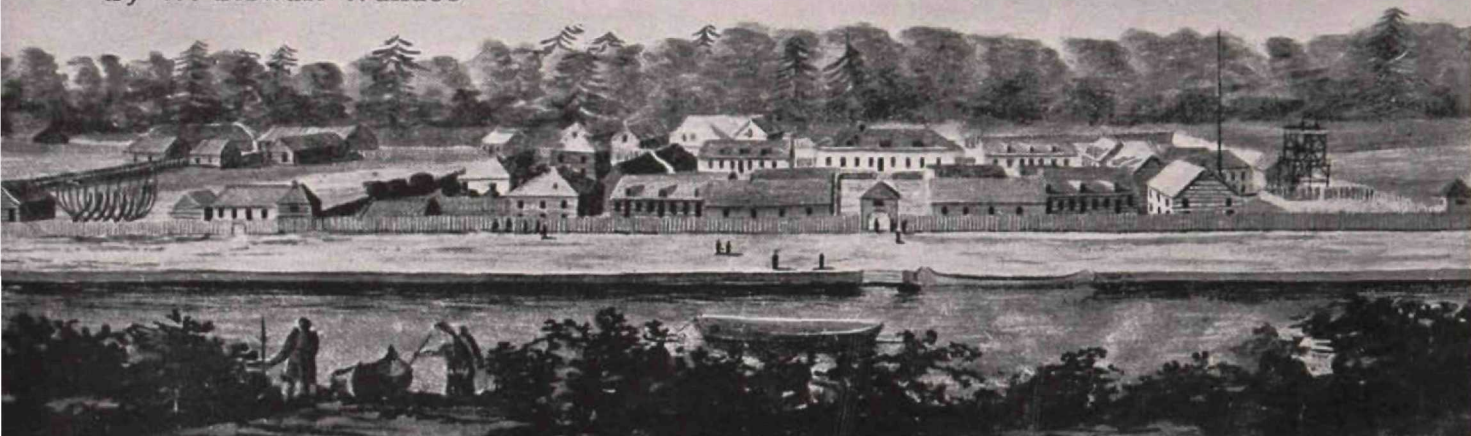


FORT WILLIAM of the FUR TRADE

by W. Stewart Wallace



The water colour of Fort William in 1812 which was recently "discovered" in Toronto. It is reproduced here by courtesy of the owner, Lt.-Col. S. A. Heward. Compare with Franchère's description below.

Wilderness headquarters of the North West Company, Fort William was the meeting place of great adventurers in the days of its glory.

FOR the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, Fort William was the wilderness headquarters of the North West Company. Before that the entrepot of the western fur trade had been Grand Portage, some forty-five miles west of Fort William on the north shore of Lake Superior; but in 1796 Grand Portage was found to be in United States territory, and it became clear that it would have to be abandoned. In 1798 Roderick Mackenzie re-discovered an old French route to the west which began at the mouth of the Kaministikwia river; and it was thereupon decided to remove the advanced headquarters of the North West Company to the mouth of this river. The building of Fort Kaministikwia (as Fort William was first named, after a post which had existed here during the French régime) began in 1801, and was completed about 1804. At one time, it was said, a thousand workmen were engaged in its construction.

This "new fort" soon became the capital of a commercial empire that stretched from the Great Lakes to the Pacific and from the sources of the Mississippi to the Arctic ocean. Here every summer the agents from Montreal met the wintering partners of the North West Company in what was a sort of annual parliament; and the canoes from departments as far away as the Columbia and the Mackenzie, with their cargoes of precious furs, met the big canoes from Montreal, with the outfit for the ensuing year. At the height of the season, Fort William became a teeming town with a population of over three thousand persons, in which the *hivernants*, or winterers, mingled with the *mangeurs de lard*, or *voyageurs* from Montreal. If we are to believe all reports, Fort William was at this season a scene of high wassail.

There are in the literature of the fur trade several descriptions of the physical appearance of Fort Wil-

liam under the Nor'Westers. In the summer of 1803, Alexander Henry the younger visited "our new establishment of Kamanistiquia." "We found," he said, "great improvements had been made for one winter—fort, store, shop, etc., built, but not enough dwelling houses. Only one range was erected, and that not complete; here were the mess room and apartments for the agents from Montreal, with a temporary kitchen adjoining. We were obliged to erect our tents during our stay, which seldom exceeded 20 days. Building was going on briskly in every corner of the fort; brick kilns had been erected and were turning out many bricks, so that we shall have everything complete and in good order before our arrival next year."

The most detailed description of Fort William in its heyday is that of Gabriel Franchère, who spent a week here in the summer of 1814. In the English translation of his *Narrative*, this is what he has to say:

"Fort William has really the appearance of a fort, with its palisade fifteen feet high, and that of a pretty village, from the number of edifices it encloses. In the middle of a spacious square rises a large building elegantly constructed, though of wood, with a long piazza or portico, raised about five feet from the ground, and surmounted by a balcony, extending along the whole front. In the centre is a saloon or hall, sixty feet in length by thirty in width, decorated with several pieces of painting, and some portraits of the leading partners. It is in this hall that the agents, partners, clerks, interpreters, and guides, take their meals together, at different tables. At each extremity of the apartment are two rooms; two of these are destined for the two principal agents; the other two to the steward and his department. The kitchen and servants' rooms are in the basement. On either side of this edifice, is another of the same extent, but of less elevation; they are each divided by a corridor running through its length, and contain each, a dozen pretty bed-rooms. One is destined for the wintering partners, the other for the clerks. On the east of the square is another building similar to the last two, and intended for the same use, and a warehouse where the furs are inspected and repacked for shipment. In the rear of these are the lodging-house of the guides,

another fur-warehouse, and finally, a powder magazine. The last is of stone, and has a roof covered with tin. At the angle is a sort of bastion, or look-out place, commanding a view of the lake. On the west side is seen a range of buildings, some of which serve for stores, and others for workshops; there is one for the equipment of the men, another for the fitting out of the canoes; one for the retail of goods, another where they sell liquors, bread, pork, butter, &c., and where a treat is given to the travellers who arrive. This consists in a white loaf, half a pound of butter, and a gill of rum. The *voyageurs* give this tavern the name of *Cantine salope*. Behind all this is another range, where we find the counting-house, a fine square building, and well-lighted; another storehouse of stone, tin-roofed; and a *jail*, not less necessary than the rest. The *voyageurs* give it the name of *pot au beurre*—the butter-tub. Beyond these we discover the shops of the carpenter, the cooper, the tinsmith, the blacksmith, &c.; and spacious yards and sheds for the shelter, reparation, and construction of canoes. Near the gate of the fort, which is on the south, are the quarters of the physician, and those of the chief clerk. Over the gate is a guard-house.

"As the river is deep at its entrance, the company has had a wharf constructed, extending the whole length of the fort, for the discharge of the vessels which it keeps on Lake Superior, whether to transport its furs from Fort William to the *Saut Ste. Marie*, or merchandise and provisions from *Saut Ste. Marie* to Fort William. The land behind the fort and on both sides of it, is cleared and under tillage. We saw barley, peas, and oats, which had a very fine appearance. At

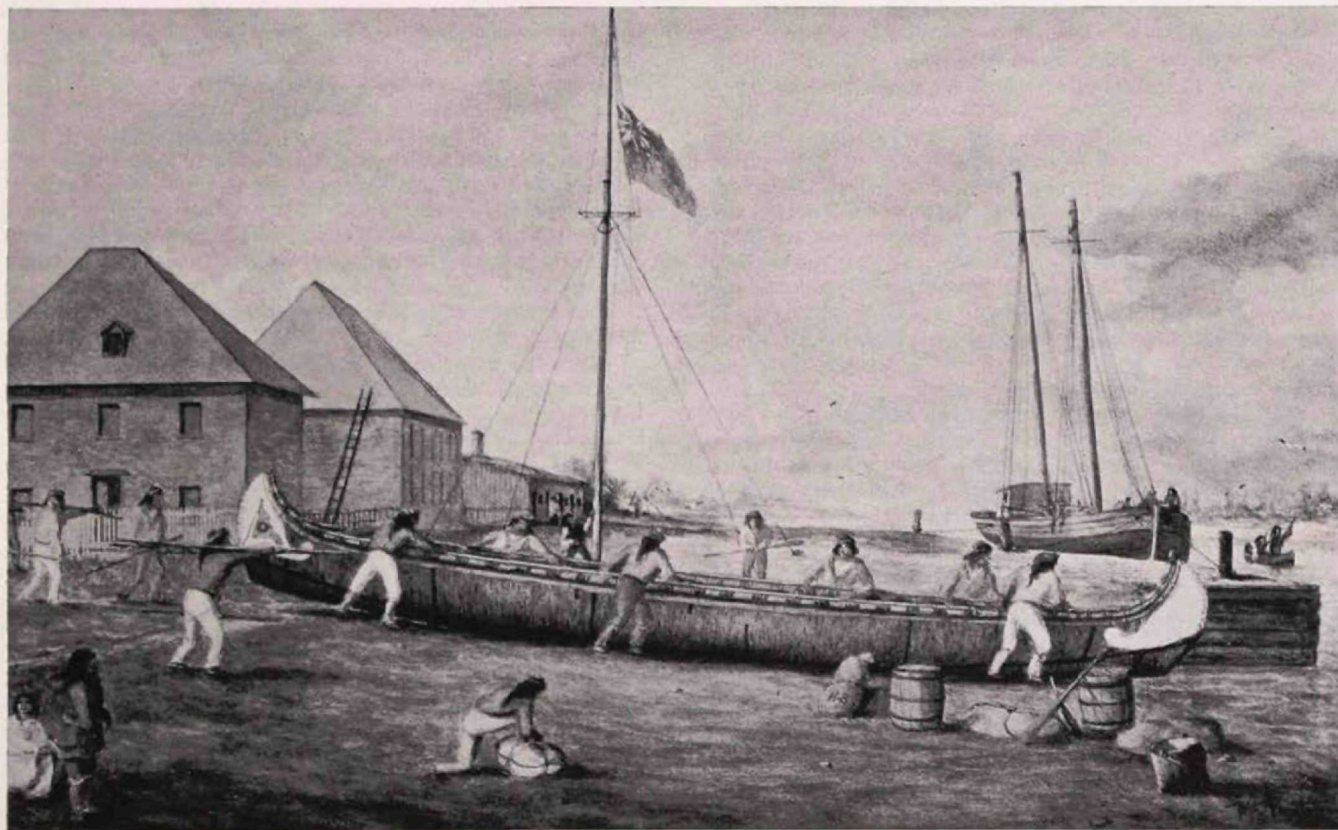
the end of the clearing is the burying-ground. There are also, on the opposite bank of the river, a certain number of log-houses, all inhabited by old Canadian *voyageurs*, worn out in the service of the company, without having enriched themselves."

Three years later, Ross Cox stopped at Fort William on his way back to Ireland from the Columbia; and he adds some interesting details:

"The buildings at Fort William consist of a large house, in which the dining-hall is situated, and in which the gentleman in charge resides; the council-house; a range of snug buildings for the accommodation of the people from the interior; a large counting-house; the doctor's residence; extensive stores for the merchandise and furs; a forge; various work-shops, with apartments for the mechanics, a number of whom are always stationed here. There is also a prison for refractory *voyageurs*. The whole is surrounded by wooden fortifications, flanked by bastions, and is sufficiently strong to withstand any attack from the natives. Outside the fort is a shipyard, in which the Company's vessels on the lake are built and repaired."

He describes the banqueting-hall in some detail: "The dining-hall is a noble apartment, and sufficiently capacious to entertain two hundred. A finely executed bust of the late Simon M'Tavish is placed in it, with portraits of various proprietors. A full-length likeness of Nelson, together with a splendid painting of the battle of the Nile, also decorate the walls, and were presented by the Hon. William M'Gillivray to the Company.* At the upper end of the hall there is a very large map of the Indian country, drawn with great accuracy by Mr. David Thompson, astronomer

Sir George Simpson's canoe and voyageurs at Fort William. A water colour by William Armstrong, done in 1909 from a sketch made there in 1860. Courtesy Canadian Breweries.





"Governor" John McIntyre's wife and daughters in the garden of the Hudson's Bay post at Fort William. Ethel M. Jones.

to the Company, and comprising all their trading-posts, from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific Ocean, and from Lake Superior to Athabasca and Great Slave Lake."

The only pictorial representation of Fort William under the Nor'Westers that has hitherto seen the light is a picture of "Fort Kaminstiquia" in 1805 in Father Aeneas McDonell Dawson's *Our strength and their strength*, published in Ottawa in 1870. This purports to be a "leggotyped" reproduction of an oil painting which was at one time in the possession of Dr. Edward Van Cortlandt of Ottawa, and which seems to have disappeared. Dr. Van Cortlandt died in 1875; and it is not easy, after three-quarters of a century, to discover what happened to his collection of pictures. The fact that the picture is labelled "Fort Kaminstiquia, 1805," is an argument in favor of its authenticity; for it was not until 1807 that the fort was named Fort William, in honour of William McGillivray, the chief partner of the North West Company. But it may be doubted if it was a painting done on the spot. I doubt if any painting in oils was done at Fort William in 1805. Probably the picture was an oil painting done from memory or from a sketch.

That it was not an accurate representation is clear from the picture of Fort William in 1812 which is reproduced herewith. This picture, which has come to light only after the lapse of nearly a century and a

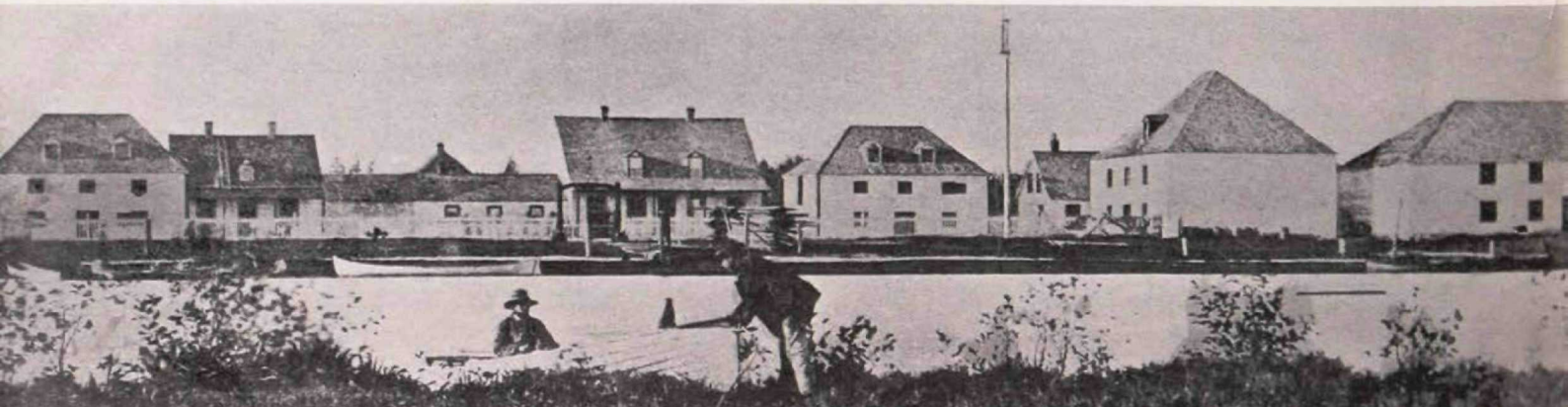
half, has a curious history. It is a water-colour painted not later than 1812 by a young Orkneyman named Robert Irvine, who came to Canada about 1811 and took service with the North West Company as the master of the *Caledonia*, one of the Company's schooners on the Upper Lakes. Presumably he painted the picture while the *Caledonia* was tied to the wharf at Fort William in 1811 or 1812. After the outbreak of the war of 1812, both Robert Irvine and the *Caledonia* were commandeered by the Provincial Marine, and fought in several naval engagements. Lieut. Irvine was taken a prisoner of war by the Americans at the battle of Put-in-Bay, and spent a year or more interned, with other British officers, in the state penitentiary at Frankfort, Kentucky. On his repatriation, he stayed for a time in York (Toronto) with his relative, the Hon. George Crookshank, a member of the legislative council who was for a short time in 1819-20 receiver-general of the province. While staying in York, he did some water-colours of the lake front, of Toronto Island, of Queenston, and of Niagara Falls. In 1817 he went to visit relatives in New Brunswick; and from New Brunswick he went to the West Indies, where he died at some date not ascertained.

When he left York, he evidently left behind him the water-colours he had painted. These remained in the possession of the Hon. George Crookshank, and afterwards of his daughter, Mrs. Stephen Heward, and his grandson, Lieut.-Col. Stephen A. Heward. Colonel Heward tells me that when he was a child the pictures were used to adorn a screen in the children's nursery. Later, he realized that they were valuable, had them removed and mounted, and placed them in a portfolio. A short time ago he came across the portfolio, and thought I might be interested in seeing the pictures. He brought them in to my office for me to see, only three or four weeks before I was due to go to Fort William to address the Thunder Bay Historical Society on "Fort William under the Nor'Westers." God is sometimes good to His children!

By comparing Robert Irvine's picture of Fort William in 1812 with Gabriel Franchère's description of it in 1814, one can identify most of the buildings.

Fort William, as here depicted, was the scene of some stirring events. In 1816 it was captured by Lord Selkirk and his De Meuron soldiers; and William McGillivray and other partners of the North West Company were arrested and sent to Montreal for trial on charges of "High-Treason, Conspiracy, and Murder." Later, in 1821, Fort William was the scene of the last act in the so-called union of the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies, when Nicholas Garry, one of the directors of the Hudson's Bay Company, and Simon McGillivray, the brother of William McGillivray, met the partners of the North West Company, and made the final arrangements for

Judging by this picture, Fort William was still a post of some consequence as late as 1875.





Sir John Carling's party at the fort gate in 1879. In the centre is Wemyss Simpson, first Indian Commissioner to the Dominion Government. Sir John stands to the right of the gate with arm on fence.

the absorption of the North West Company into the Hudson's Bay Company.

The aftermath of the story is in the nature of an anti-climax. After 1821, the fur trade was diverted by the Hudson's Bay Company from Montreal to Hudson Bay, and the canoe route from Fort William to Montreal fell into comparative disuse. Fort William consequently sank into the category of a third-rate post. "We regretted to find," wrote the American Lieutenant Keating, when he visited Fort William in 1823, "that this establishment, which had cost a great deal of money, and had been embellished with many of the luxuries of civilized countries, is about to be suffered to fall to ruin; the change in the direction of the trade having made this a place of but very little importance."

The decay of Fort William can be traced in the accounts of later visitors. When John McLean stopped there on his way to the West in 1833, he wrote, "We found the grand depot of the North West Company

The stone powder magazine, last remnant of the old fort, as it appeared in 1899. It was demolished about 1902. A. N. Mouat



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falling rapidly to decay, presenting in its present ruinous state but a shadow of departed greatness. It is now occupied as a petty post, a few Indians and a few old voyageurs being the sole representatives of the crowded throngs of former times." Ten years later Sir Henry Lefroy spent three days at Fort William, and he testifies in his *Autobiography* that "Fort William was even then but the shadow of its former self. . . . Extensive ranges of sheds and warehouses were falling into decay." When Washington Irving published *Astoria* in 1836, he wrote the epitaph of the post in these famous words:

"The feudal state of Fort William is at an end; its council chamber is silent and deserted; its banquet hall no longer echoes to the burst of loyalty, or the 'auld world' ditty; the lords of the lakes and forests have passed away."

Fort William, it is true, continued in existence as a trading post for another forty years. It was still in operation when Wolseley's Red River expedition stopped in 1870 at "Prince Arthur's Landing" on its way to Fort Garry, when Lord and Lady Milton spent some months in 1872 at Point de Meuron, and when Lord and Lady Dufferin paid a visit to the head of the lakes in 1874. But the coming of the railway (the first sod was turned at Fort William in 1872) sounded the knell of the fur trade; and when John McIntyre, who had been in charge at Fort William since 1855, retired in 1878, the post was closed. Five years later, in 1883, all but one of the buildings of the fort were levelled to make way for the Canadian Pacific Railway freight yards. Only the stone powder-magazine—known as the "Old Fort"—remained for a time, used by the railway as a storehouse. But it too has now disappeared, and nothing remains of the old capital of the North West Company except the street names of the modern city, which sound like a roll-call of the Nor'Westers.