

The last in the long line of York Factory factors, A. B. McIvor, locks the main door of the depot for the last time. "The door closed, and a page of history opened."
G. A. Beare

The End Comes

BY MALVINA BOLUS

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WHEN I flew in to York Factory one evening in June to see the old post closed I thought this was going to be a sad story. The end of a once-thriving port vital in the life of a new country would be full of nostalgia and sorrow.

I was wrong in two ways. Though the ice of Hudson Bay gleamed in the distance I had not realized that the heart of Rupert's Land lay so far north. What I thought of as evening was day and when a blazing tawny full moon rose slowly above the spruce trees across the Hayes River facing the great depot, the rosy glow of sunset warmed the clear blue sky behind the building.

As for the huge factory—solid and four-square it stood, its work accomplished, its purpose fulfilled, ready to carry on or ready to stand proudly alone, undisturbed by fretful man.

Thick nail-studded doors with elaborate wrought-iron hinges and heavy iron latches opened in to the depot. Inside were vast halls, with many-paned windows lighting the enormous beams of the ceilings. I went upstairs, worn stairs, the handrail polished by the grip of many fingers. Inner windows looked across the square court to the back of the building, and snow buntings twinkled in the sheltered well. The walls of the hall, lined with satiny old spruce, glowed golden in the soft light and one was filled with a sensation of warm and mellow beauty, great strength, and peace.

The biggest hall extends the full length of the back of the building on the second floor. More than a hundred feet long and about twenty-six wide, it is bright with thirteen windows to the west, more at either end, and yet more on the inner wall. Proportionately high, great square-hewn beams span the hall, strengthened by huge knees in the manner of ship-building. Trees to provide such timbers do not grow locally, for the marshy wind-swept ground supports only stunted willows and larch with a few straggling spruce. The wood for the building was felled up the rivers, floated down and hauled up the thirty- or forty-foot bank to be shaped and set, just as it had been in the days of Henry Kelsey and Joseph Colen.

From the hexagonal lookout which tops the depot there is nothing to break the view. To the north there is a glimpse of the remains of the massive stone powder house that was destroyed by lightning, a few Indian houses on the river bank, and the muskeg stretching to the Bay where ice glimmers against the Point of Marsh or shifts out to sea with a change in the wind. The scene, in fact, must be little changed from the day when John Abraham built the first York Fort, somewhere along this shoreline. Much later, eager eyes must have watched from this window for ships entering the treacherous Hayes River with

people, supplies, and mail for the factory. To the west, an unbroken expanse of marsh and scrub growth to the Nelson River—two hours winter travel away—where, 175 years ago, La Pérouse's men hacked their way through the bush to besiege and take York Factory. Southwards, about a mile away, the white and green Anglican church stands out sharply, beyond it the straggling settlement of Indian houses. On the east flows the silty river with its islands and sandbars and in from the far shore the edge of the spruce forest pricks the skyline. All about is silence, save for the distant wail of Indian dogs from the village.

The Indians, of course, knew that York Factory had reached the end of its days. Just a year ago the tall flagpole between the depot and the river hard by the sole remaining cannon had been struck by lightning. The top of the pole was ripped off and flung to the ground. A few weeks later the upper part of the pole was splintered by another lightning stroke. The voice of doom had been confirmed. Though electrical storms are fairly common in these parts and flame may be seen running through the houses there is seldom any resultant damage, the destruction of the disused powder magazine a generation ago being one of the exceptions.

This was good trapping country, and only twenty years ago six or seven hundred Crees would trade at the post with their catches of mink, otter, ermine, fox (white and coloured), beaver, and muskrat. Fishing was not very good, but it was adequate for an occasional change of diet and for dog food, and sometimes the belugas (white whales) would come up the river, or there was a polar bear to be taken. Moose and caribou were plentiful. Lately there has been little trapping—furs bring poor returns—the fish have gone, few caribou travel this way—a drying head and few sets of antlers on a cache were the only evidence—and there are not many moose. Only one young hunter had done well the past winter; he had taken three moose. The pale hides, cleaned and scraped, were hanging from the rafters of his house, not yet smoked to the brown colour they would have when made into moccasins and jackets.

Now there were only sixty or seventy Crees in the settlement. They had been drifting away for several seasons, some to work at posts on the railway line, some on defence construction, or at Churchill; others to new trapping grounds or different reserves. The chief, William Beardy, had left last summer and one of the councillors, John Beardy, who helped to board up the windows of the old depot, was the acting chief. The few remaining natives were being moved to the reservation at Split Lake.

The village, like most others, straggles along the river bank for about a mile on either side of the HBC post.



The last two bales of merchandise are taken out from the great building which used to hold two years' outfits of trade goods for the whole Northern Department. M. Bolus

The larger settlement, to the south, is reached by a narrow, rotted, log and plank walk across swamp and gully, through a dwarf forest of six-foot willow and tamarack.

Squelching away from the post downstream, one comes to another board walk and crosses a deep cleft spanned by a good bridge. On its far side, on the highest land, is the little cemetery, round the broken thirty-inch walls of the powder house. The cemetery is gently sliding away and the fences round the graves, once painted in blues and greens and white now weathered a silvery grey, topple in the soft muskeg. Such graves as have headstones date from the 1860s, though a large stone almost buried in the ground commemorates Joseph Charles, a native of Hudson Bay who died on May 27, 1836. The older cemetery farther north has been washed away by the river. The only iron-railed grave is that of Chief Factor James Sinclair. An impressive granite headstone is inscribed to "William Wastesecoot, a great hunter for 60 years. He paid his last debt in 1901. He spoke the truth and was held in esteem by all officers he worked for. This stone is placed on his grave by one of them."

Right: The depot, in the form of an open square, 100 by 105 feet, was erected in the 1830s and 1840s. The last remaining building of the factory, it now stands boarded up and empty. A. B. McIvor

Everywhere about the Factory, which once had so many buildings and so many people, there are relics to be found for the looking. Foundations of buildings, stumps of pickets, crumbled boardwalks, bricks, bits of iron, can be felt beneath the muskeg and easily uncovered. Broken pieces of a gun carriage lie by a creek; the silt of the foreshore reveals bits of the dock that once stood below the bank, ships' timbers and ironwork—and almost anywhere there are cannon balls. There they will remain, perhaps seen now for the last time before they sink out of sight.

There were so many last things about those June days at York Factory. The last visits of the young nurse who cared for the Indians—trudging along the dipping pathways, calling in overheated homes, taking temperatures, sticking needles in brown babies. The last dealings in the store whose shelves were growing bare, where the men would gather to chat in their soft Cree speech with the last post manager, big and friendly, who spoke Cree as well as they did.

The last service in the neat white church which boasts stained glass in one of its windows. The villagers sitting outside in the sun while the children played and music from the organ drifted out, until the bell called the flock in. The long prayers in the melodious Cree voices, the

vigour of the singing, the blessing asked by the native lay reader made a deep impression.

Then there was the last canoe brigade to leave the Factory—only five canoes, two men to each, with outboards to speed them up river to the post at Shamattawa. (How different from the old days, when scores of birch-barks would set out up that same stretch of river for the far west, laden with goods from 18th-century London, and paddled by painted and befeathered Indians!) It would take these big canvas freighters three or four days up the Hayes and God's Rivers to reach the post, with supplies no longer needed at York. The last heavy goods would go by the scow, poled and tracked up the rapids by its crew of eight as in the old days. Much of the freight had already been moved by the Company's small aeroplane. When the Bay was open, a ship would make its last call to pick up boxes destined for the south.

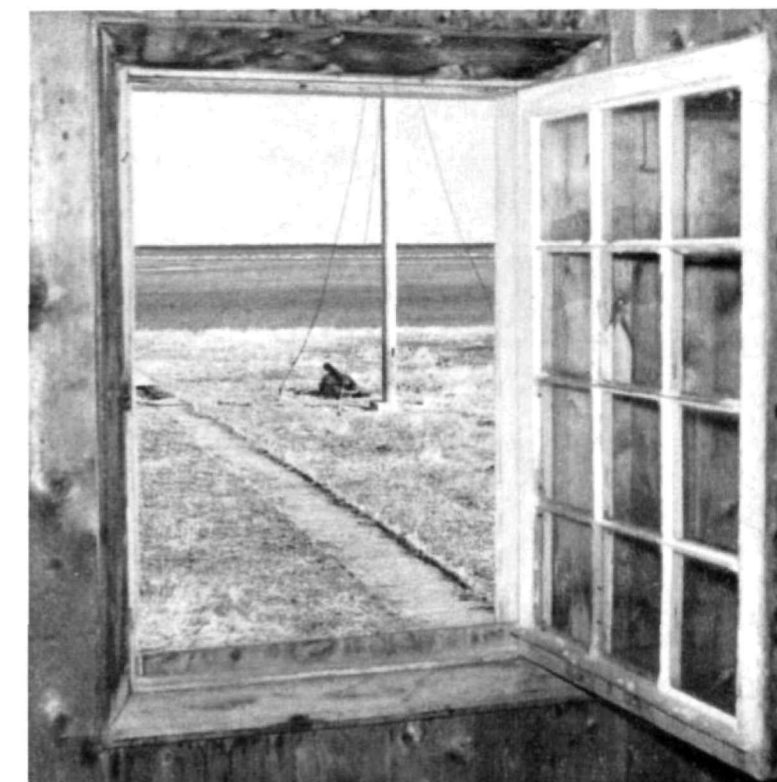
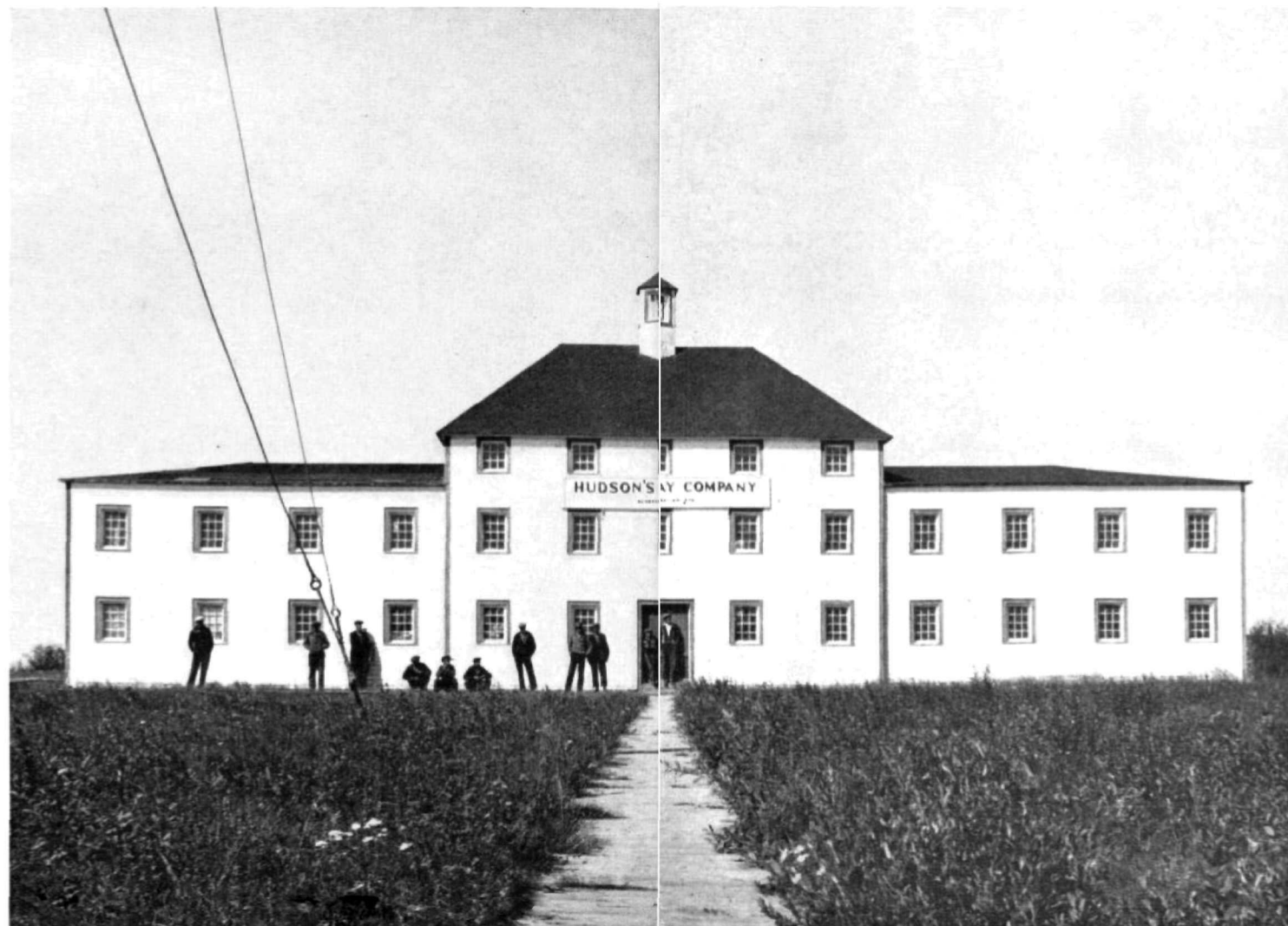
The last look and the last load. The bronze plaque marking an historic site had been fastened to the bolted door. In the big canoe were some mixed supplies, the last furs of the old YF mark, and the passenger. The furs were meagre bales that needed no pressing—some otter and beaver in the larger of the firmly sewn hessian bundles, some mink in the smaller.

The Indians paddled out to the scow in the Hayes to which boats or planes tied up, for the river is treacherous with sandbars and rocks, a swift current and tidal waters. The plane took on gas from the drums on the scow. The load was put in—oil, furs, the precious mail—and the line cast off.

As the plane lifted the storm presaged by the sun ring two days before rolled in from the Bay. Cloud hid the mouth of the river and the shifting ice beyond; it swept towards the large square building as if to hasten its retreat from the activities of man, for nature was waiting to take over, cutting back the river bank with churning ice in the spring, blasting with gales, sucking down into the oozing muskeg.

Who could tell how long it would be before the work of man, after 275 years, would be only torn fragments peering from the river bank or drowned timbers revealed by moss-grown streaks across the ground? Or would lightning strike again and end the story quickly in a crackling blaze? The foxes would creep nearer and in winter the white bears might come snuffling round to see what was there.

A flight of Canada geese winged across the sky. The mist swept in and the wind tore at the walls, but the Factory stood staunch and proud as we dipped in last salute. ♦



The Hayes River, the last cannon, and the lightning-shattered flagstaff seen through an upstairs window. A. B. McIvor