

VOYAGING TO YORK FACTORY

BY OLIVER WARNER

Mr. Warner is a council member of the Society for Nautical Research, Greenwich, and is the author of the standard history of British Marine Painting.

I—The Ships.

IN the later part of the eighteenth century, two well-known marine artists delineated Hudson's Bay Company ships as they lay in the Thames, ready for their voyage westward. Both pictures are now at Beaver House, the London headquarters. John Hood made his lively wash-drawing in 1769; Francis Holman embarked on an impressive full-scale painting ten years later, in the midst of the War of American Independence. The two artists show the same three ships—the *King George* of 220 tons, the second of her name; the fourth *Prince Rupert* of 202 tons, and the second *Seahorse* of 180 tons, the last with a highly decorative figure-head.

These pictures, valuable as records, and works of art in their own right, represent the high flourish of the trading Company. The ships concerned have certain notable features. All are pierced for guns, as was the Company's practice, though it is unlikely that they carried pieces heavier than 12-pounders. These would have been useful against privateers, though they could not have been expected to drive off a regular man-of-war; they also served for the incessant saluting and gun-signals usual at the time. The white ensign was flown, possibly an echo from earlier days when the king's ships were sometimes employed in the Company's business; and the drift-rails and bulwarks which grace the quarterdecks were painted a distinguishing shade of royal blue, no doubt a style of the time. Everything about the trio speaks of continuity and tradition. This is as it should be, for from the day that the little *Albemarle* of 40 tons sailed to Port Nelson in 1682, soon after the Company had been founded, until the use of a steamship in the later nineteenth century, continuity was a factor in the marine side of the service.

The first ship of any size to sail to York Fort was the first of the three vessels named *Dering*. She arrived in 1687 under the command of William Bond. She was of 120 tons, and was a "pink," that is, she was a flat-bottomed, narrow-sterned three-master, with a triangular or lateen sail at her mizzen mast.

The three ships, *King George*, *Prince Rupert*, and *Seahorse*, would probably have been termed frigates, the type of fast, mainly square-rigged vessels which, owned or chartered, made up the largest proportions of ships sailing to and from York Factory. According to contemporary definition, a frigate implied, in a merchantman, a descent of four or five steps from the quarter-deck into the waist, as distinct from the flush-decked type of vessel.

Another type in at least occasional use (besides the narrow-sterned pink) was the sloop, which was usually single-masted and fore-and-aft rigged, with a gaff-topsail and a jib; and there was at least one hoy, rigged not unlike



The 310-ton barque "Ocean Nymph," bought by the Company in 1862—the year she was built in Québec—approaches York Factory. In front of the fort the inhabitants get ready to salute her with cannon. Robert Bell

a sloop, though smaller in size, and not really suitable for ocean passages. Ketches also figure in the series, together with galleys and schooners.

The peculiarity of the ketch, which was built with her two masts set well aft, was the great space before the main mast. This made them a useful type in the navy for carrying bombs or mortars, and in the merchant service it gave easy access to the holds. Galleys were flush-decked, and had long outgrown their old definition of being powered by oar as well as sail. They were fine and slender in line. As for the schooners, they usually carried a square fore-topsail, and sometimes a square top-gallant sail and royal, in addition to the fore-and-aft rig characteristic of the type.

So variously were sea-terms used in earlier times, even in different parts of the same country, that it is surer to rely on such contemporary representations as may be preserved, than to base close descriptions upon definitions which may not exactly fit the case. "Tonnage" is a case in point. This generally meant "burden"—*i.e.*, the number of tons (originally "tuns" of wine) a ship could carry when loaded to a proper sea-trim, but the word was not consistently used in that sense. All that it is safe to say is that a considerable variety and size of vessels appeared on the run to York Factory, and that the greater number did their duty well, often over many years.

The requirements of Joseph Fortescue, factor in the year 1875, for "the class of vessel . . . for future trade between London, Churchill and York Factory" probably varied little over the centuries. Ships were needed "flat in bottom, to allow of crossing the bars of shallow rivers." Fortescue added that they "ought not to draw more water than 10 feet with full cargo," and should have fore and aft hatches. It was, in fact, natural hazards which dictated the type of ship likely to be successful. They could never be large; they must always be well found.

II—Some Captains.

William Bond, who commanded the *Dering* in 1687, is recorded as having made four voyages to the Bay and back as captain, and like so many of the commanders, he had served in a lower rank (he was actually a gunner) before obtaining his first command. Bond was one of the few captains not noted as having met exceptional difficulties with ice on a run which (so some text-books will blandly tell you), should be navigable from the middle of July to October. In fact, all through the decades, captains complained that ice was where they had never met with it before, and that navigation was more difficult than ever!

The next notable personality was Leonard Edgcombe, who made six voyages, and would have added to his service



Wash drawing by John Hood of the "King George" (II), "Seahorse" (II) (centre) and "Prince Rupert" (IV) leaving Gravesend for Hudson Bay in 1769. This is the earliest known picture showing the Company's original house flag—the coat-of-arms on a white field. The original drawing is in Beaver House, London.

had he not encountered French privateers off the Scilly Islands, and been so badly mauled that he had to return for repairs—his fellow captain, John Ford of the *North-west Fox*, being captured. The Scillys were long a favourite rendezvous for privateers, and in 1696 William Allen, captain of H.M.S. *Bonaventure* which the Admiralty had sent to recapture York Fort from the French, was actually killed in action there on the homeward voyage.

Michael Grimington, who had served as mate to Edgcombe, wintered at York in 1690-1 as captain of the fire ship *Prosperous*, and in 1693, as captain of the *Royal Hudson's Bay*, he helped to recapture Albany, which had been taken by the French. Four years later he and his ship, *Dering*, were captured at York by the French under D'Iberville, but he was allowed to sail her home.

George Spurrell is noted in 1723 as commanding the frigate *Hudson's Bay*, the fourth of her name, built on the Thames by James Taylor. This was another example of continuity in Company affairs, since Taylors and Rاندalls and Grays and Brents of the Thames built most of the ships throughout the eighteenth century, though chartered vessels were also employed, as indeed they continued to be, the size gradually increasing as cargoes grew. Captains, though they often served long in the same ship, were transferred freely. The special interest of the Spurrells

lies in the fact that they were, between them, commanding Company vessels from 1723 to 1763—no less than forty adventurous years—George for 34, and Joseph for 12.

Another pair with long service were the Jonathan Fowlers, senior and junior. Their activities spanned the years between 1744 and 1782, so that they overlapped those of the Spurrells. Both families had, on the whole, a series of trouble-free passages. This was no doubt partly due to experience and skill, though Jonathan Fowler junior recorded a very foggy journey in 1776, and once got into difficulties because someone laid a buoy wrong in Hayes River.

In 1746, going north-about from the Thames with a call at the Orkneys, which was at first a custom during time of war, and later a regular practice, giving opportunity to take aboard labour recruited in the islands, the Company's ships found themselves in the same convoys as an expedition in search of a Northwest Passage. These expedition ships, the *Dobbs* galley and *California*, had been fitted out by Arthur Dobbs and other opponents of the Company's privileges. Both vessels were commanded by ex-Company employees. The interest of the occasion was heightened by the fact that H.M. Sloop *Shark*, in charge of the convoy, was commanded by Christopher Middleton. This officer, after about eighteen voyages to Hudson Bay for the Com-



Capt. Wm. Christopher, who commanded the "Seahorse" (II) from 1771-81 and the "King George" (III) 1783-8.



H.M.S. "Shark" taking leave of the Company's flotilla and the "Dobbs" and "California" off the Orkneys, 1746.

From the painting by Norman Wilkinson in Beaver House.

pany, had obtained "a Commission in the King's Service"—through the influence of Arthur Dobbs! In 1742, while in command of H.M.S. *Furnace*, Middleton had made a search for a Northwest Passage, by way of Wager Inlet. His failure, and his expression of the opinion—later justified—that there was in fact no strait on the shore of Hudson Bay leading to the Western Ocean, had caused Dobbs to accuse him of concealing the Passage in the interests of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Admiralty to keep him unemployed for nearly two years during a time of war!

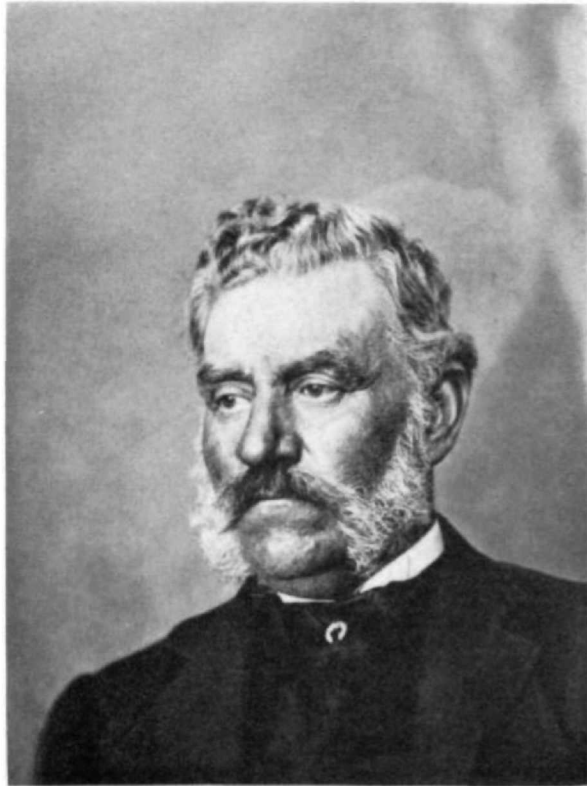
In 1790 Henry Hanwell senior made his first voyage, in charge of the *Seahorse* (III) and for some years he and John Turner seem to have been among the most trusted officers. Turner had an unfortunate experience with the Navy in 1806. When off the coast of Caithness, outward bound, the *King George* (III) was stopped by the frigate *Phoebe* "which we first took for an Enemy's Ship of War," so the log records, "and was not Undeceived till I was on board. Several shot was fired at us." In Turner's view the Captain's "conduct otherwise was a disgrace to the English Navy." Two years later he reported that "the Ice continues very close and heavy, this is my 41 years on the Bay, and the like I neaver experienced before."

Hanwell's last voyage to York Factory was made in 1815, the year of Waterloo, after which time John Davison

became a major character, though he had a run of ill-luck with ice. Continuity is apparent all through the nineteenth century; such men as Benjamin Bell, John Davison, Robert Royal, John Grave and David Herd, all with meritorious records, show the trait, and confirm the view that York Factory ships were in vastly experienced hands.

Herd's first voyage as shipmaster was in 1839, with the fifth *Prince Rupert*. Despite being rather more unlucky with ice than many of his fellows, he continued active all through the forties and fifties, his last voyage being with the second *Prince of Wales* in 1863. Notable names in the later years of the period were James Taylor, Henry Bishop, John McPherson, William Barfield and Alexander Gray. Captain Gray had the distinction of taking charge of the first steamship used on the run. This was as late as 1892. Her name was *Erik*. Built at Dundee in 1865, she was acquired by the Company in 1888 for what seems the modest price of four thousand guineas. In the opening year of the present century, the *Erik* still under Captain Gray, grounded off Cape Tatnam and was sold on her return home. After 53 years of work in northern seas, she was sunk by a submarine in August 1918.

Some records of personality may serve to conclude what, from limitation of space, must be no more than a sketch of a wonderful span of service. In 1864, after Captain



Capt. Henry Bishop, who commanded the "Prince Rupert" (VII) on the York Factory run from 1865 to 1873.
J. L. Cotter

David Herd had made his last voyage in command, the Company's Secretary wrote: "He has made 32 successful voyages to Hudson's Bay, in 26 of which he was in command of ships. During that long period he has had no casualty worth speaking of, nor was there ever a claim made on the Underwriters for losses sustained by vessel or cargo. His success has perhaps been unexampled in any service. . . ." R. M. Ballantyne, famous as a Victorian writer for boys, and himself once in the service of the Company, wrote of Herd that he was "a thin, middle-sized, off-hand man; thoroughly acquainted with his profession; good-humoured and gruff by turns; and he always spoke with the air of an oracle." By the end of his career, Herd must have had good reason for his oracular way.

III—The Hazards.

In well over two hundred years' regular operation of a run known for its hazards, the one certainty was that there would be incidents in plenty. In 1718, still very early days, the *Hudson's Bay* (III), left York Fort on 16 September but met a violent storm and ran aground, receiving such damage from "grinding against the stones" that she made

twelve inches of water in two hours. She returned to York, was patched, and sailed again in a little over a week. That would have been smart work by the standards of any age.

Equal swiftness occurred (though in a sadder way) with the succeeding ship of the same name, in 1736. She was lost, with all her cargo, on 1st July, outward bound: "being entangled in ice six leagues within the Cape Resolution, the ice shutt upon us by the sides only (for it was dead calm at the time), and crush'd our sides in, and sunk her in twenty minutes, notwithstanding all our endeavours."

Records exist in some detail of adventures with ice: for instance, in July 1821, when the first *Prince of Wales* (never a very lucky vessel), the *Eddystone* and the *Lord Wellington*, carrying settlers, "were all grappled to the same piece of ice." It was foggy and raining and the *Prince of Wales* was struck and stove in by a large "isle of ice." Part of the cargo was transferred to the *Lord Wellington* and "repairs were carried out, before the journey to York

could be completed." Five years later the same ship ran upon a rock in making her outward passage.

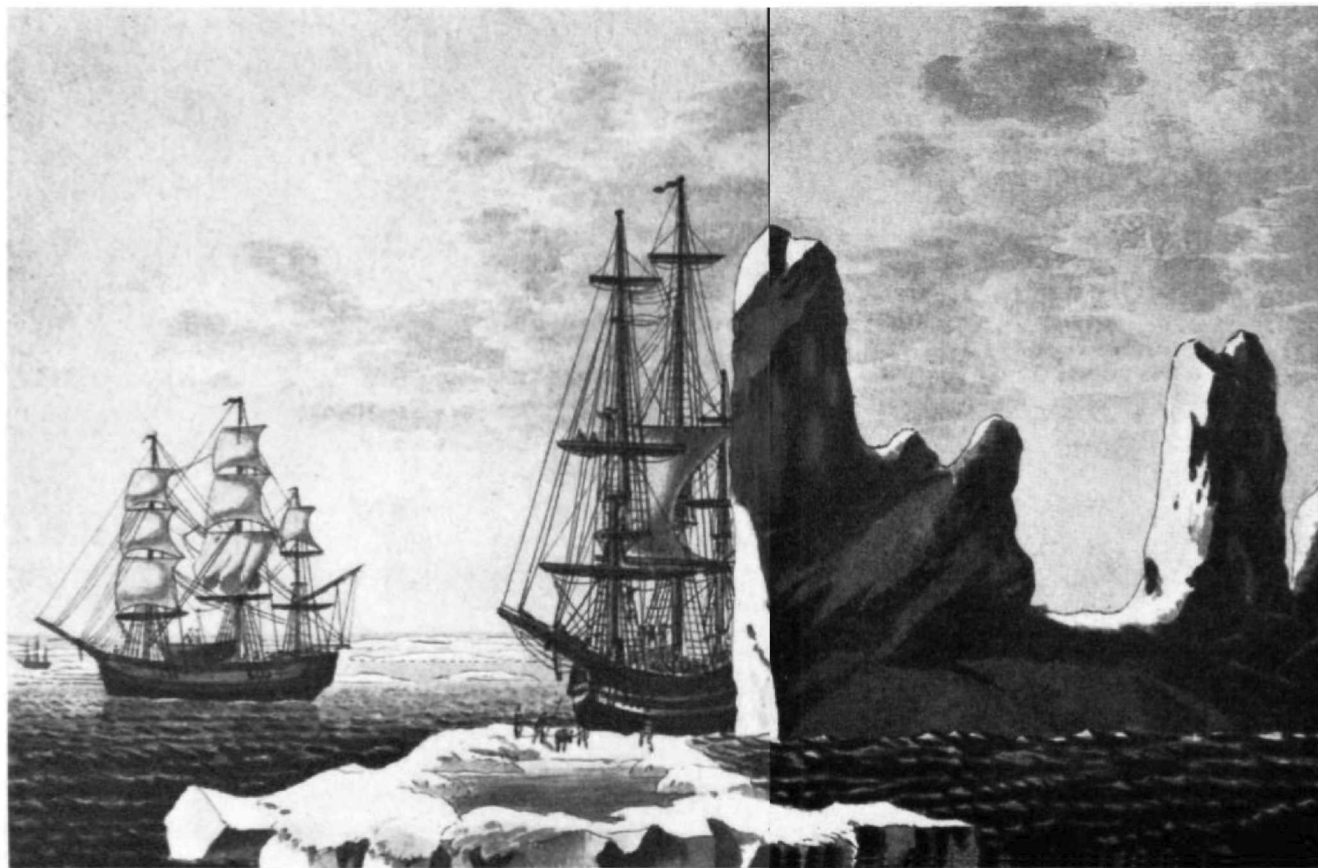
If such adventures were not uncommon in days of sail, even steam did not always bring relief. In 1899 the *Erik* met excessive quantities of ice on her outward voyage, and, in thick fog, she ran into a large iceberg which carried away her jib-boom, bowsprit and port cat-head. Captain Gray reported it as "the most trying voyage I have ever had." The captain was reported as objecting to "navigating his ship in through the long shallows of Port Nelson with no lights or headlands to guide him, only on a clear day the thin fringe of the lowlands showing above the horizon."

Perhaps James Knight summed up, as well as anyone, the hazards of Hudson Strait, in his York Fort Journal for Feb. 12, 1717:

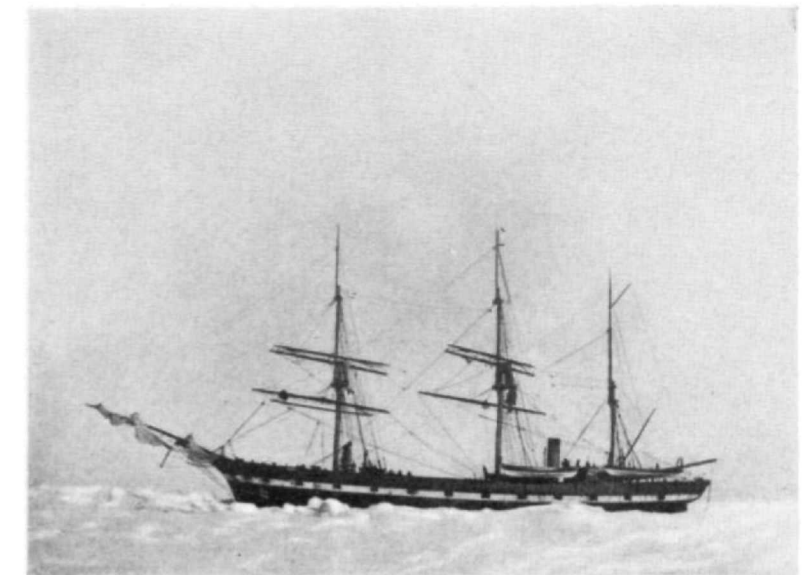
"... There is one thing as I have Often thought to write about wch. is concerning the ships coming out of

England before the 10th of June so many Days as you Send her out before that time it is so many days to[o] Soon & I have Seen the Experience of it myself in Six Voyages as I came into this Country wee have always had the best Passages and clearest of the Ice when wee came out at that time then when wee come out Sooner & I have heard Sevrall Commanders Say the same beeing freer from Ice for when they come out Sooner they meet with the whole Body of the Ice in the Narrow of the Straights from the Isles of Gods Mercy down to Resolution that the Ships gett into it and cannot gett out again Whereas if they was to Stay a few Days Longer A NWt Wind and the Current as setts from the Norward carrys the Ice out to the Southrd. so Leaves away to cunn the Ship through the Small Shattered Ice the Main body being gon. . . ."

Those remarks are as true today as they were when Captain Knight dipped his quill and wrote them down, two hundred and forty years ago. ♦



The Swiss settler ship "Lord Wellington" in danger of being crushed by a drifting iceberg in July 1821. From the water colour by Peter Rindisbacher. Public Archives of Canada



The "Erik," first steamer used on the York Factory run in 1892, beset by ice in Hudson Strait, July 1897.