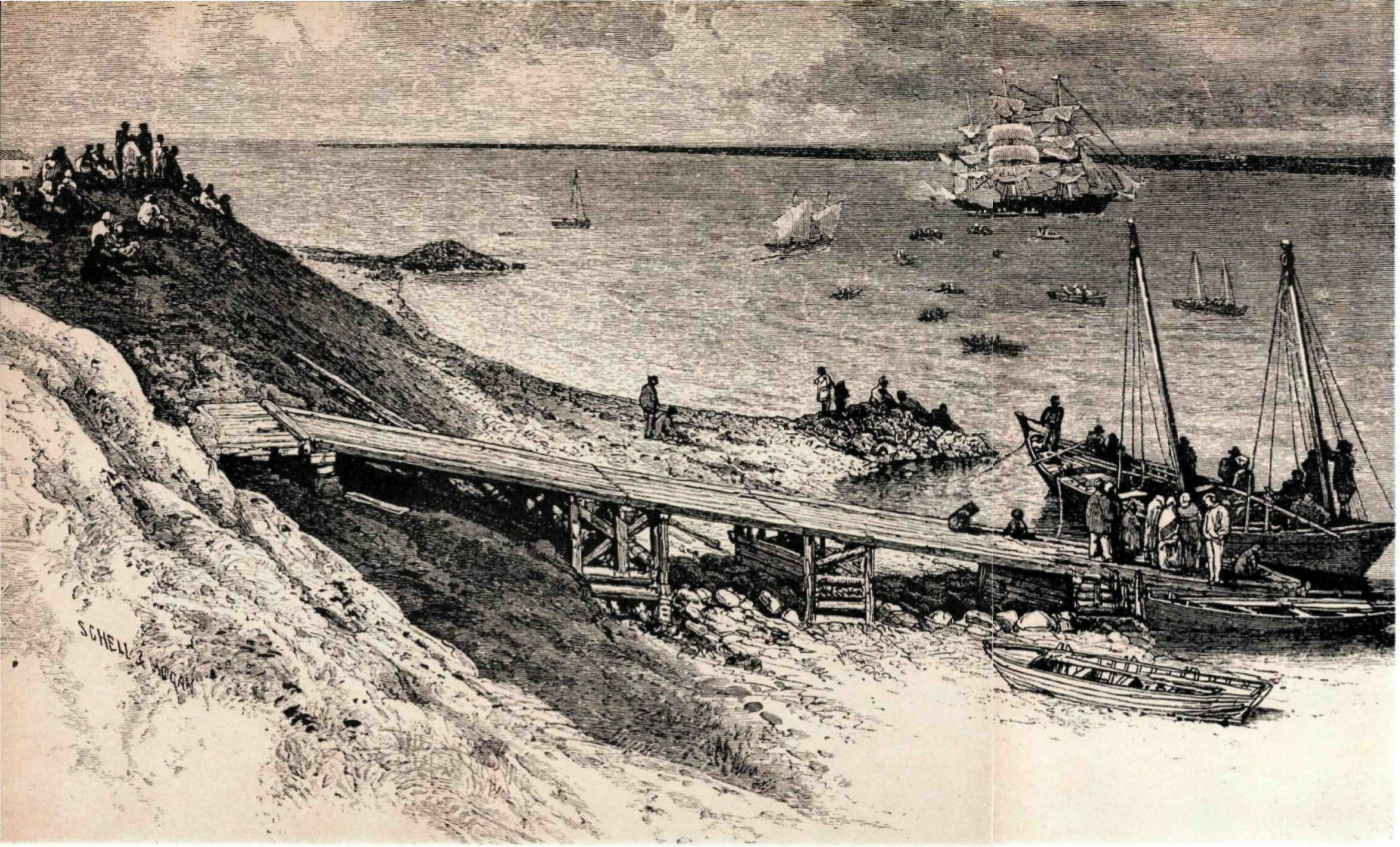


Great excitement as the annual ship arrives at York in 1880. From Grant's "Picturesque Canada."

Life on the Hayes

by A. M. JOHNSON

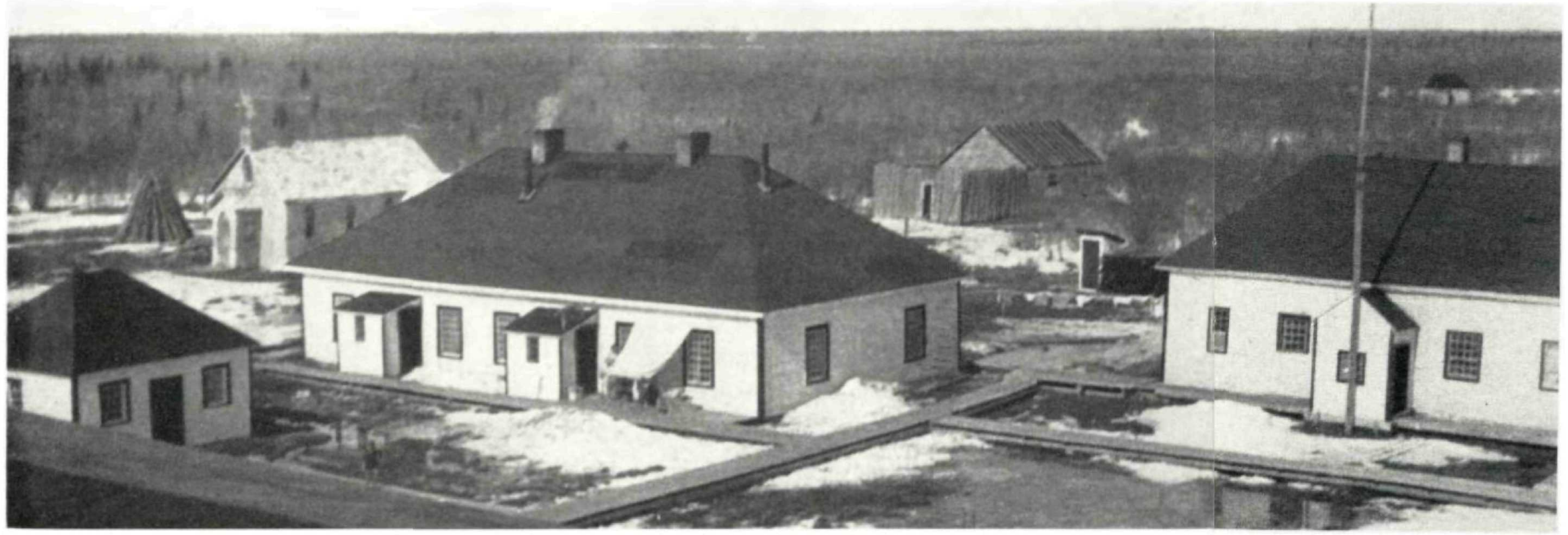
Miss Johnson is the Archivist of the Hudson's Bay Company.

ALTHOUGH the York Factory records form one of the largest groups in the Company's archives and provide source material of immense value to those interested in the development of the Canadian Northwest, it is sometimes rather difficult to build up from them a picture of day to day living on the shores of Hudson Bay. This is not in the least surprising when it is remembered that they are, for the most part, strictly business records. But with the help of descriptive matter which a few Company employees and a number of observant travellers have left, either in documentary or published form, we can at least get a glimpse of a past way of life.

Almost all this descriptive material belongs to the first half of the nineteenth-century, when York was the headquarters of the Northern Department of Rupert's Land. R. M. Ballantyne spent two happy years at York, and in his ***Hudson's Bay*** he has left an entertaining description of life at the "monstrous blot on a swampy spot, with a partial view of the frozen sea." During the same period, the 1840s, the wife of the officer in charge of York Factory was writing long, gossipy, letters to her relatives in Scotland. Unlike Ballantyne, Letitia Hargrave had no thought of publication and would be astonished if she could know that her letters, published by the Champlain Society, provide one of the most interesting, and certainly the most informative, sources of information on the York Factory of her day. These letters may not be of value to the economic historian; but to those more interested in people than in tables of production figures, that matters little. The official records will show the earnings of Alexis l'Esperance, the well-known guide, but it is Mrs. Hargrave who brings him to life by mentioning that he was a "distinguished" guide, and that he and another were "dressed in sky blue capots scarlet sashes & high scarlet night caps [tuques] and mocassins."

Although York was important to the Company from its beginning in the seventeenth-century, it was not always the large-scale depot storing two years' supplies for the Northern Department and handling tons of freight for Red River settlers and for missionaries. It began as a trading post. The change in its functions took place gradually, and as age and physical needs demanded, the "Confusd. heap of old rotten Houses" ceded to Governor Knight by the French in 1714, grew into the trim group of buildings in which James Hargrave and his contemporaries enjoyed a degree of comfort unknown to earlier occupants. It is difficult for us to realise the utter isolation of Knight's "Lodging" on the extreme edge of a vast, unexplored land. But the isolation, the vulnerability to attacks by savages and enemy French, the fear of starvation and greater dread of the consequences of fire, and the dependence on a Governor and Committee three thousand miles across the ocean formed an accepted part of a way of life. The rewards were modest. A salary, plus a percentage on the beaver traded, plus an occasional gratuity, gave the Governor of York after years of service, a competence, not a fortune.

The renewal of trade at York by Knight in 1714 was with the Indians of the surrounding country and with those who came from far inland. When the ice disappeared from the rivers, flotillas of Indian canoes arrived at the Bay-side, and in his manuscript ***Observations on Hudson's Bay*** Andrew Graham has left a colourful word-picture of the pomp and ceremony which preceded the bartering of skins for European goods during the eighteenth-century. (*Beaver* June '47.) Then would follow a busy period packing the furs for shipment to London and in making up the annual accounts. Then, in August, often before the books were finished, came "ship-time." Pleasant anticipation would give way to ever-increasing anxiety if the ship was late, for her annual visit was the only link with the outside world. When the ship did arrive the exchange of cargoes had to be made as quickly as possible so that she could have a chance of getting through Hudson Strait before the ice held fast. This need for haste meant long working hours, and in her time, Mrs. Hargrave mentions her brother, William Mactavish, working in the store from 4.30 a.m. to 8 p.m. at this season.



The large house in the centre is the Hargraves'. That on the right is Bachelors' Hall where R. M. Ballantyne lived. A. Harkes

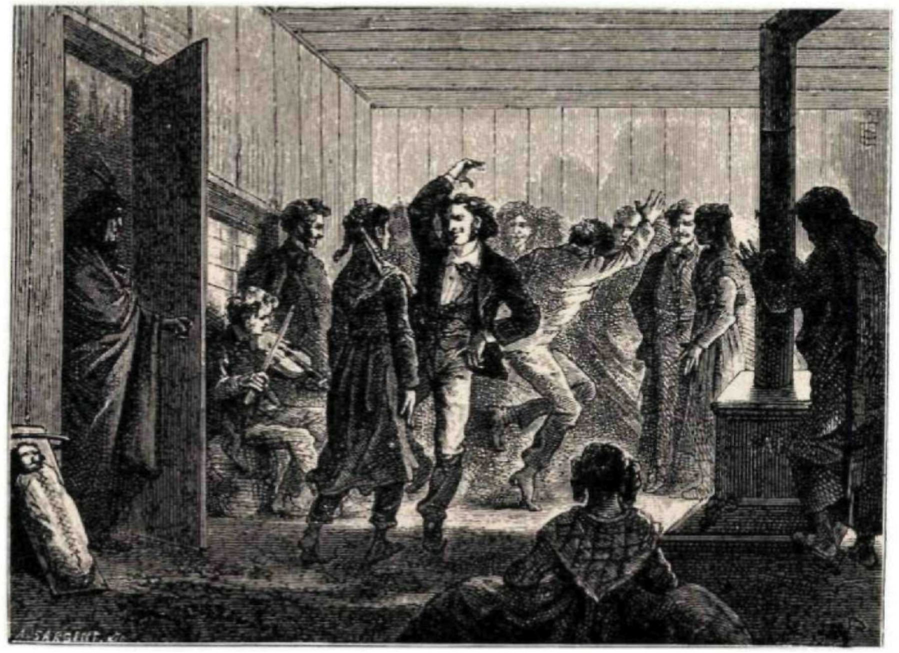
With the establishment of inland posts the far-distant Indians no longer came to trade at the Bay-side. In time the ceremony described by Graham ceased, and instead of trading with Indian customers for weeks on end, the employees at York prepared cargoes of trading goods and provisions for transport to the inland posts. The summer months were enlivened by the arrivals of brigades of boats laden with furs from the interior, and as well as ensuring a quick turn-round for the ship, haste was necessary if the boats re-laden with the new outfits were to reach their distant winter quarters before freeze-up. In the early period the crews of these brigades were mainly Orcadians and Scotsmen, but in the nineteenth century the Canadian voyageur became a familiar figure at York.

The Company's records show that in 1846, when the proceeds of the Northern Department's trade amounted to the most valuable cargo up to that time shipped to England, there were approximately forty-three men, including officers, employed at York. As against this figure, Knight had a complement of thirty-two in 1714, including a deputy governor, a warehousekeeper, a surgeon, a sloop-master, an armourer, a smith, a cooper, and a tailor. In reply to criticism that there were too many on the strength, Knight remarked in his inimitable fashion: "it must never be told Men more as here is no work to do in the Country."

As an example of the everyday work that went on at the fort during the 18th century it is illuminating to read journal entries such as that of April 15, 1784: "Thursday . . . Cox, Magnus Flett & Laughton at work on the new building. Armouror making gun worms Cooper trimming a cask to fix on the head of a beacon, Bricklayer and one man taking down the ruins of the old Chimbles [chimneys], two writing, Bews mending hinges, Taylor at work for trade two making sinnet, Guthrie and Isbester under the Surgeons care. Eleven men with the great Sled getting Snow Ice &c out of the yard, the rest cutting firewood & cooking. . . ."

Knight required strong, active men to get the enormous quantities of wood needed to keep "a Great fire for 8 Months in the Year Night and Day," and as the years passed it became necessary for the labourers to go further inland to collect the four cart loads used each twenty-four hours to keep the stove alight. All writers speak of the intensely cold, but healthy, winter weather, when exercise could be taken out of doors: and all writers mention the short, hot summers, when the ground around the fort was a fly- and mosquito-infested swamp.

During this less pleasant, but very busy season of the year, visitors from "outside" arrived in the annual ship. The only visitors—as opposed to new recruits—who came to Hayes River from England in the eighteenth-century were the expedition people of the *Dobbs-Galley* and the *California*. The ships spent the winters of 1746-47 in Ten Shilling Creek before setting off in search of a Northwest Passage, but the personnel kept at a polite distance until dissensions drove Captain Francis Smith of the *California* to ask for accommodation within York for himself and his wife Kitty. The nineteenth-century brought a two-way traffic of Selkirk Settlers, Arctic explorers, botanists, missionaries, contingents of the Sixth Regiment of Foot, Chelsea Out-Pensioners, and the Canadian Rifles, members of the Geological Survey of Canada, and a host of other interesting people to this "Grand Central Station" of the North.



Christmas dance in Bachelors' Hall. From Ballantyne's "Hudson's Bay."

The climate of York and, until later times, its complete isolation from food-growing areas, meant that large quantities of European food had to be sent there each year. The seventeenth-century invoices show that beef, pork, cheese, flour, oatmeal, peas, malt vinegar, currants, raisins, spices and butter formed part of the early cargoes. And the Committee usually sent the Governor of York presents of sherry, port or other wine as a mark of favour. European provisions were expensive, and towards the end of the seventeenth-century, when war and bad weather had sent prices sky-high, London urged a "grow more" campaign. Perhaps they had not been fully informed, or maybe did not believe, that crops which came to full maturity in Europe would not, as they expressed it, "bring forth strongly" at York where, as they said, "such rich Mould has laine fallow it may be from the Creation." Gardens were, of course, cultivated from the earliest time both by English and French occupants, and seeds being sent from Europe, and lettuce, green cabbage, and "other small herbs . . . used for making soup in winter" were grown. It is not know just when the traders began to make use of the native wild berries which Ballantyne mentions being preserved and made into tarts during the winter.

Then there were "country provisions." In his account of twenty years at York Factory from 1697-1713, the Frenchman Jérémie remarks that although the climate was bad the country food gave good living when "Europe helps us out with bread and wine." He was referring, among other things, to the hares and partridges which the men hunted when the weather was not too cold to stir outdoors. He kept a record one year and found that 80 men had eaten 90,000 partridges and 25,000 hares. Ballantyne mentions hunting being the usual winter pastime on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

There was excellent fish to be got at York[*] and, in addition, there were the seasonal appearances of geese and deer. The goose hunt was a highly-organised affair and the writers of the York journals rarely omitted to note the numbers salted down and to remark on their fear of near starvation if the hunt was a poor one. In the early years the Company's employees set up deer hedges at points up Hayes River which are marked on the "Draught of Nelson & Hayes's River" in Robson's *Hudson's Bay*, and in addition to the deer meat obtained from these hedges and from the Home Guard Indian hunters, a certain amount of trade in provisions was carried on with the Indians. In Ballantyne's day supplies for summer consumption were stored in the ice-house which was filled each spring with blocks of ice each about three feet square. This remained solid during the short summer.

Extra provisions were, unless times were bad, given out on special occasions, particularly at Christmas and New Year. Ballantyne gives a lively description of Christmas Day at York in the 1840s, when one of the most useless oxen was sacrificed to provide a huge roast of beef to accompany the wild goose, partridges and salt pork. What Captain Knight ate or with what ceremony he personally kept Christmas in 1715 we do not know, but he records that for three days of feasting he gave every four men 4 geese, 1 piece of beef, 4 hares, 7 lbs. fresh pork, 2 lbs. fat, 1 lb. butter, 3½ lbs. fruit, 4 lbs. flour, spice, "a good dish of Colwerts" and a hogshead of strong beer. A year later Knight kept Christmas "without a Venison Pasty" and his men "feasted" as far as short supplies would allow

Generally speaking, other occasions for rejoicing during the early period appear to have been New Year's Day, St. George's Day (April 23), when target practice was part of the occasion, and Guy Fawkes' Day (November 5).[†] Then there were royal birthday and accession dates which helped to break the monotony of work, but May 2, the Company's own day, appears to have passed unnoticed. By the nineteenth-century the custom of having a slight celebration to mark royal birthdays and such-like occasions appears to have been forgotten, and with the increasing recruitment of Scotsmen and Orcadians New Year's Day became more important than Christmas Day. Then dances came into fashion. Ballantyne describes the ball which he and his fellow clerks gave to all the men at the fort, and to the twenty or so Indians belonging to the district, following the Christmas dinner already mentioned. Scotch reels were danced and the music on this occasion was provided by an Indian on a home-made fiddle and by a boy with a kettle drum.

We shall never know the first kind of instrument to make music at the mouth of Hayes River. Since man has made music from the earliest times it is reasonable to suppose that an English instrument, however simple, was first heard on Nelson River when Sir Thomas Button's ships wintered there in 1612-13, and that a Frenchman first performed on Hayes River in 1682, when Radisson and des Groseilliers had returned to their old allegiance. We know that the Quaker Governor Bayly had "a Violl & shell & Strings" with him on James Bay in the 1670s, but so far we have not been fortunate enough to learn if either Governors Geyer or Walsh of York had a taste for string music, or who was the first to introduce the bag-pipes there. Mrs. Hargrave had a piano of six-and-a-half octaves made in Vienna to grace her elegant drawing-room at York, and the Gladman family had a barrel organ in which were a drum and some other instruments. But long before this, Joseph Colen had, in 1798, left there no fewer than six barrel organs which he valued at £18. Jew's harps are listed in the invoices (they are still traded to the Eskimos) and no doubt many, as personal possessions, found their way to York in employees' pockets.

Books, "of which," said Ballantyne, "we had a few," were taken to Hudson Bay from the earliest years, and James Hargrave mentions them as becoming as familiar as household words during the isolation of winter. The Company supplied bibles, prayer books and books of homilies, and surely laid the foundation of a technical library by sending out books on medicine and gardening in 1693. But the titles and exact subject of the "good Books . . . to promote Virtue and discourage Vice" sent out in 1747 are not known. By the time Joseph Colen left York in 1798 after a residence there of about thirteen years, he had acquired a personal collection of about 1,400 volumes.

Sunday services were urged by the Governor and Committee from the early days, but it must be confessed that on occasion they were postponed when heathen customers turned up for trade. We gather from surviving French

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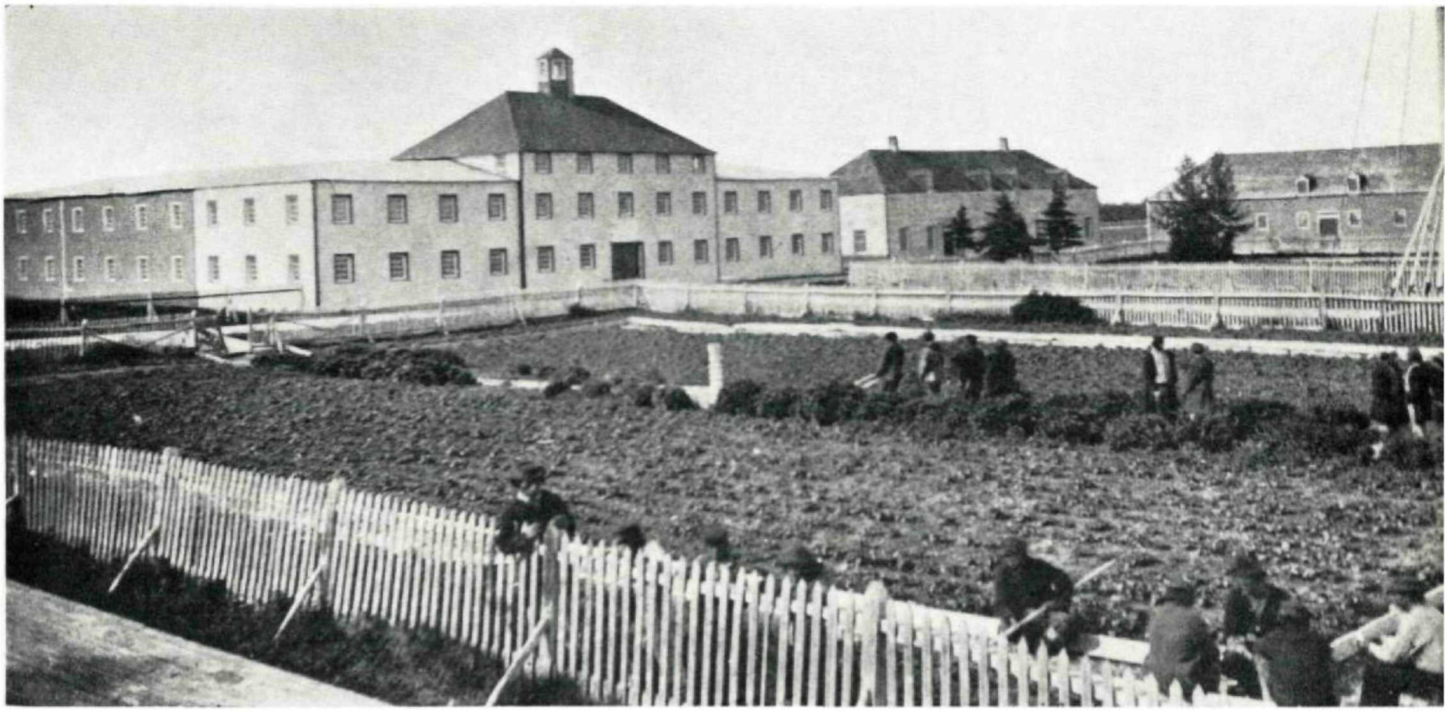
[*] Though James Knight wrote that "I have ketcht more fish in one Nights time at Albany River then I have here in all these 2 years."

[†] More than a century after Fawkes' abortive attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605, Henry Kelsey vehemently referred to the celebration "in commemoration of that cursed hellish Plot."



The vegetable garden at York in 1880. Robert Bell

accounts of the Port Nelson area that Roman Catholic missionary activity began there almost as soon as fur trading, and it is to one of these early missionaries, Father Marest, that we are indebted for an account of the events on Nelson and Hayes Rivers in 1694. So far as we know, the Reverend Thomas Anderson was the first Protestant clergyman to go to York but his duties would seem to have been those of a Company chaplain rather than those of a missionary to the heathen. That was in 1693. Anderson helped to draw up the terms of surrender—in Latin—when the French captured York in 1694 and, so far as we are aware, not before the Reverend John West landed in 1820 en route to Red River did another Protestant clergyman see the shores of Hudson Bay. In the years that followed ministers of various denominations passed through York, but it was not until the autumn of 1856 that the Bishops of Rupert's Land laid the foundation of the Anglican Mission Church of St. John.

With the growth of railways and the introduction of steam on the northern Canadian rivers the inland posts became independent of York and its importance as a depot gradually declined. It continued as a trading post and, until air transport and radio became parts of northern life, the winter isolation of its occupants must have been almost as complete, but not so uncomfortable, as it was in the days when George Geyer, Thomas Walsh, the Frenchman Jérémie, James Knight and Henry Kelsey—to name but a few—governed at the place which is now only a name on the map of Canada. ◆

A 19th century engraver's idea of the trading room at York in the 1840s. From Ballantyne's "Hudson's Bay."