

# York Factory: The Crises of Transition, 1870-1880

By Arthur J. Ray

*This year marks the 300th anniversary of the Hudson's Bay Company's first post in the area of York Factory. After 250 years of activity their operations finally closed there in 1957.*

THE HAYES AND ECHIMAMISH RIVERS provide the easiest water route into the western interior of Canada from Hudson Bay. This strategic advantage favoured the development of York Factory as the dominant Hudson's Bay Company post during the Company's first two centuries of operation in North America.

Until 1774, the volume of trade conducted at York Factory exceeded that of all of the other Bay-side posts. When the Company decided to expand its operations inland beginning with the construction of Cumberland House in 1774, York Factory declined as a trading centre but emerged as the principal transportation depot for the burgeoning network of posts. In 1821, it also became the headquarters of the vast Northern Department. By the 1870s, however, York Factory's heyday had passed and the post faced a severe crisis regarding its future. It was plagued with a number of problems, some of which were related to local environmental pressures, while others stemmed from structural changes taking place within the Company's trading empire that adversely affected the position of the factory. An examination of these problems in 1880 by Joseph Fortescue, chief factor, not only throws light on a number of basic issues relating to the history of the establishment, but offers glimpses into the changing nature of the fur trade after 1870.

Although strategic advantage favoured the dominance

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*Quotations from its archives by permission of the Hudson's Bay Company.*

of York Factory for nearly two centuries, the local environment was not able to support the establishment and its attendant population of Europeans, mixed-bloods and Indians. The resulting strain meant that the post became increasingly costly to operate. For example, to meet its fuel requirements the York Factory settlement required 2,000 to 3,000 cords of wood annually. In addition, 6,000 to 7,000 planks were sawn for construction and maintenance purposes. This was an excessive demand on the local forestry resources, given that the post was located on the boundary between the northern boreal forest and the tundra where tree growth was very slow and mature trees relatively small. In his detailed account of the difficulties facing York Factory in 1880, Chief Factor Joseph Fortescue wrote:

... the result of this continued demand has been that the immediate river banks [of the Hayes] are now entirely denuded of wood from the mouth of the Hill River 120 miles distant from the fort, and behind it the green woods are cut down to a depth of eight miles up Nelson River.

Under these circumstances the difficulty of obtaining firewood is yearly increased until I was — last winter — driven twenty miles up Fox River for this winter's supply of raft wood a distance of 140 miles.

Adding to the problem were the destructive forest fires said to be common every year. Fortescue claimed that the combined effects of forest clearance and fires had largely eliminated all of the green trees within 150 miles of the factory.

While he may have somewhat exaggerated the extent of deforestation, it is clear that the costs of obtaining wood were becoming prohibitive by 1880 and further expansion of the lumbering areas impracticable. In detailing the problems of attempting to collect firewood along the Fox River, Fortescue noted:

... after cutting, ten days are consumed getting to and from the place where the wood lies, and allowing for



*York Factory viewed from the south-east, c. 1930. The motor schooner 'Fort Severn' is at the dock.*

three trips, will take thirty days out of a spring lasting only five or six weeks at most before the summer heat dries up the river and renders rafting impossible. A strong force is therefore required, between 20 and 30 men are employed.

Once the wood was rafted to the fort, the problems were not over.

Hayes River is a tidal one, and very often opposite the fort, the banks are nearly twenty-seven feet perpendicular above low water mark, and once down the rafts must be carried to the wood yard as speedily as possible, before a gale of wind breaks them up and scatters the wood of half a winter. All available force is employed to this purpose, even Indian women bearing a hand when men are scarce, the carrying alone is about three weeks work of some twenty or thirty hands, while the remainder are rafting . . .

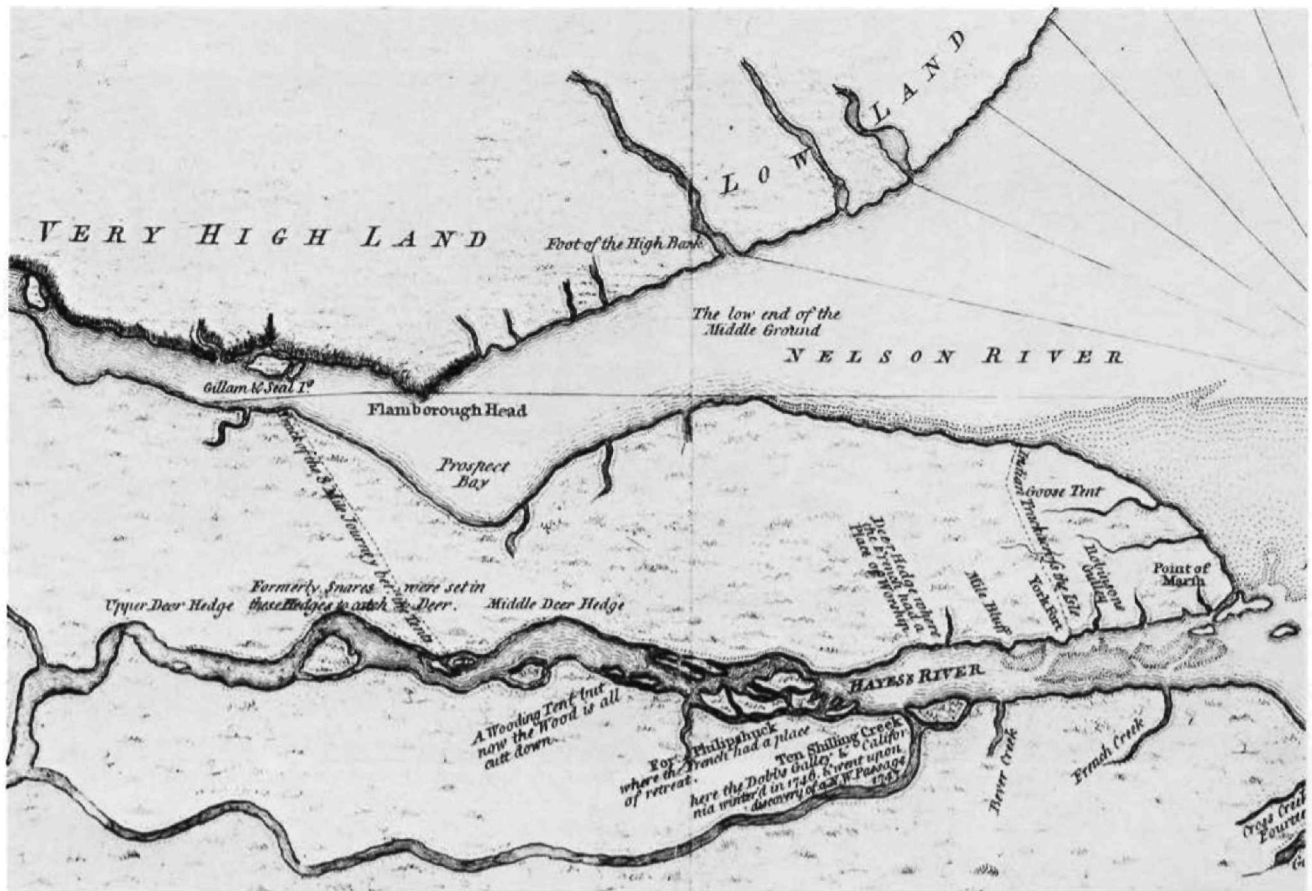
Thus, by 1880 it was taking a labour force of some forty to sixty men and women nearly two months to transport firewood from cutting sites to wood-yards. It is uncertain how many man hours were spent felling and cutting this wood.

Fortescue was not optimistic about the prospects of reducing fuel consumption at the fort unless the size of the establishment could be reduced. The factory covered eleven acres and included over twenty buildings. Many of these were said to be old and 'open', aggravating the heating problem.

one man burns as much wood in a house as twenty but he cannot produce it. The clerk's house must be kept up under all circumstances as it contains the only cellar in the fort. York is one hundred and fifty miles within the line of constant frost; it is also built on a swamp, and fires go summer and winter here, the only place in the country where they do so. The ground is never thawed much more than a foot or eighteen inches, so a shower of rain sits. No wonder therefore an emense amount of wood is consumed...

As in the case of firewood, severe difficulties were being experienced in efforts to obtain the green wood that was required for construction and maintenance. Traditionally this wood was obtained 'back of the fort' or to the north along the shores of the Nelson River. It was hauled overland in winter using oxen which could make two or three trips each day. However, as the remarks cited above indicated, by 1880, the green-wood clearing areas had been pushed up the Nelson River a distance of eight miles. According to Fortescue this meant that the oxen teams could then only make one trip per day.

It follows therefore that either double the number of cattle must be used (thus increasing the labour cost of hay), or only half the usual wood is obtained. The first of these alterations is impossible, we get all the hay that can be got in the time to get it. The deficiency has therefore to be made up in rafted wood and thus it has come about that double the labour is now required rafting.



Joseph Robson's map shows there were deer hedges within ten miles of York Factory in the 1740s. By 1880 the deer had ceased to inhabit the local area in winter and summer.

Thus, environmental constraints precluded increasing the number of oxen that could be supported which in turn meant that the seasonal (summer) labour demands of the factory were substantially enlarged. As the subsequent discussion will show, the post could not afford this added expense owing to changes in the Hudson's Bay Company's system of operations and accounting.

Besides the problem of declining wood resources, York Factory was experiencing the growing burden of other environmental pressures. Traditionally, a significant portion of the provision requirements of the population associated with the post was obtained from the local environment. Geese were most important and as many as 5,000 to 10,000 were annually killed by the local Indians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These geese were collected at the post where they were salted and stored in casks for consumption throughout the year. Besides geese, some woodland caribou and hare were also obtained. These local foodstuffs were augmented by inland country provisions, most notably pemmican, wheat and cattle from the Red River colony in the latter half of the nineteenth century, fish from lakes of the Shield uplands, and by food imported from Europe. To keep costs to a minimum, every effort was made to obtain locally as much food as was possible.

Although a considerable effort was made to maximize

the use of country provisions, this objective was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. By 1880, the local goose hunts around York Factory were said to have declined to the point that the Company had to go farther afield for its supplies. The record suggests that Fort Severn had emerged as the principal source area. Forty-five to sixty casks used to be supplied annually at four pennies for a pound or 3¼ shillings for a cask. But, even this post's hunts were uncertain. Commenting on this problem, Fortescue wrote:

For some years passed the goose hunts have been all but entirely unproductive. Now while Severn for four years out of five has totally failed to give us any geese at all, instead the cheapest of all rations, we have been compelled per force to fall back on pemmican or pork and beef, the first five times and the latter 2½ and 3 times dearer per ration.

Fortescue was especially troubled by the need to import pemmican because the price of this commodity was increasing as the bison herds dwindled. In the mid-nineteenth century it was obtained at the rate of 3½ to 4½ pennies a pound. By 1877 it was costing York Factory 9½ to 10 pennies a pound. Furthermore the quality was increasingly poor. Forty per cent of that received in 1877-78 was said



to be inedible. Facing these problems, Fortescue looked forward to the day when pemmican would no longer be available, believing that cheaper alternative sources of food would have to be developed, thereby cutting the expense of provisioning the factory.

The situation with respect to caribou and hare was equally bleak in 1880. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century caribou were common in the area around York Factory. Joseph Robson's map shows that there were three deer hedges within ten miles of the post in the 1740s. By 1880 however, deer had ceased to inhabit the local area in winter and summer, being seen only in the spring and fall when some were said to pass reasonably close to the post. Regarding hare and ptarmigan, Fortescue observed:

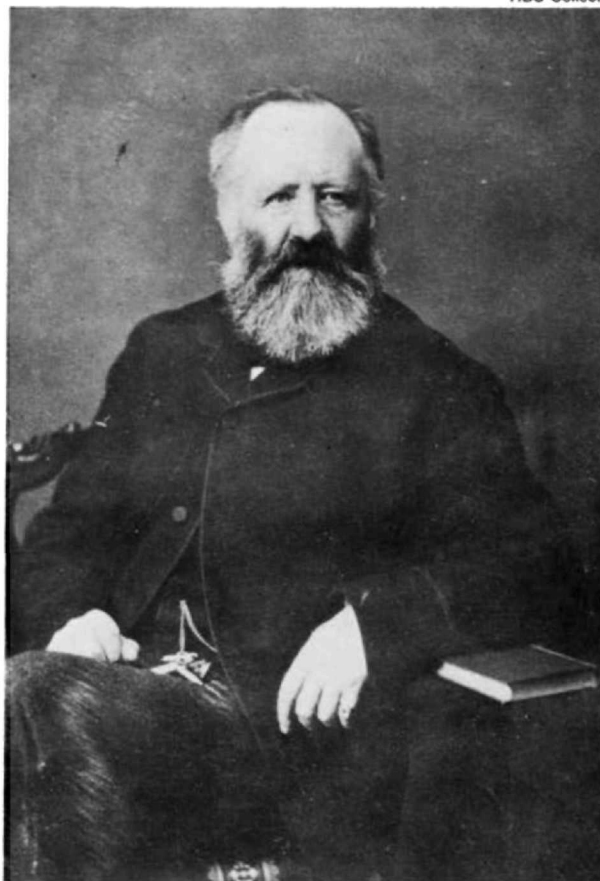
The cutting and other destruction of the woods has driven away the rabbits, never very numerous, while since 1875 no ptarmigan have been on this side of the Nelson River though plentiful enough half way to Churchill.

Not only had hunting pressures and local forest clearing had an adverse affect on the post's food supplies, it had also reduced local fur returns to the point that fur-trade revenues were marginal. In Fortescue's words:

Beaver from constant trapping have been pretty well killed out of the district, and only marten, foxes remain to make up the returns no other fur even existing here in any quantity. Martens follow the rabbits, when one disappears the other goes too, and foxes are very uncertain being sometimes very numerous and at other (as this year) very scarce indeed, especially the white, which generally appear in thousands for a few weeks and then cease suddenly. There have been none here for five or six years.

Compounding these environmental problems, changes in the Hudson's Bay Company's organization of its operations had the effect of further undermining the economic viability of York Factory. In 1873, York Factory's role as headquarters and supply depot for the Northern Department officially ended, although another two years passed before all of the inland districts stopped receiving their outfits from this port. This development affected the post in a number of significant ways.

While serving as the headquarters of the Northern Department, most of the new labour recruits and retiring servants spent a part of the trading year at the factory either awaiting the arrival of the ship from England or the brigades from the interior. While at the post, usually in the summer, these men were employed cutting and collecting wood as well as making hay. According to Fortescue, an average of sixty new recruits arrived at York Factory every year and only one half of them went into the interior in the first year. Augmenting this labour pool of about thirty men per annum were the retiring servants said to number from thirty to forty a year. Of importance, the subsistence and



Chief Factor Joseph Fortescue, who was in charge of York Factory from 1872 to 1884.

wage costs of this sixty to seventy-man labour force were not charged against York Factory accounts. Rather, they were assigned to the general charges (expenses) of the Northern Department as a whole. In this way, a substantial portion of the labour costs for maintenance of York Factory, particularly its soaring wood-gathering expenses, were being subsidized by other districts. This was no longer the case after 1874 and these burdensome costs were directly charged against the post's accounts.

Exacerbating the situation, York Factory also lost two of its primary sources of revenue in 1873. One of these was the 'York Sales shop'. This was the Company store where servants bought goods. According to Fortescue:

. . . the York Sales shop had the monopoly on sales to servants, missions, trip men and freemen over nearly the whole department. The cost of supplying the sales shop being then only 33 1/3 per cent on cost, and the issues mainly 50 to 100 per cent, one need not be surprised at a very handsom profit being made on its transactions...

Besides losing this lucrative monopoly (it netted the post £1,000/year), the factory no longer profited from the Company's freight-rate structure after 1873. Regarding this issue, Fortescue observed:



*The vegetable gardens at York Factory, from a photograph by Robert Bell, 1880. To keep costs to a minimum every effort was made to obtain locally as much food as possible, but due to the scarcity of the important game resources this became increasingly difficult by 1880.*

Under the old method of working the depot then, when the bulk of imports reached the country by this port, and the servants of the whole department passed here, a large portion of the factory expenses were saddled to the department. Thus, by distributing the cost of landing bulky goods, by imposing a fixed advance of 33½ per cent on all classes to cover freight, etc., the factory secured the principal portion consumed here, viz. provisions, at a comparatively low charge for freight and the rest of the depots paying more than actual cost landed, on their portion, contributed thus to the reduced expenses of the depot.

In this way, as forest clearance and over-hunting were adding to the costs of operating York Factory, its ability to underwrite and pass on these expenses was severely curtailed.

Some profits might have continued to accrue to the post from a limited boat traffic to Norway House but labour problems led Fortescue to completely terminate the York Factory brigades in 1875. In explaining why he took such action, Fortescue said of the labourers and tripmen:

... they were adopting a rather impudent tone, only working when they pleased, and at what they pleased, generally striking at critical times, as when hay was wanted to be boated, or the schooner loaded [1873/4] and choosing such busy times to hold 'land meetings' and other agitations it was felt they required a sharp

lesson to bring them to their senses. I therefore decided on not employing them on the river at all but doing the little general freight remaining by the Oxford brigade run to 1875.

Thus, Fortescue dealt with his labour problems by resorting to a lockout of the tripmen.

Although this action may have served to assert management's authority over the local labour force, nonetheless it was costly to the Company and adversely affected the economic position of the local Indians. Regarding this predicament Fortescue observed:

... the [Indian] debts were affected, not only because they had to be increased to keep them from perishing and enable them to hunt at all — but because during the freezing period, if an Indian did not pay his fur debt, a measure no longer available when freighting ceased, such a reduction would go far to represent the increase the Indian debts have experienced since that time.

In this way the termination of summer freighting activities eliminated an important source of income for the Indians. Forty-five jobs were lost that paid between £5.10s. and £11 per summer. This affected over one-half of the local adult male Indian population. The Indians thus were forced to become more reliant on the Company for welfare. Also, they were compelled to depend more heavily on trapping activities.

There were a number of problems with the local trapping

economy however. As noted above, fur resources were already overtaxed in the immediate vicinity of the post. Disruption of the local environment due to forest clearance and fires was only part of the reason. Fortescue indicated that the York Factory 'Homeguard' Indian population had reached a low point about 1835 due to a fever. He estimated that at that time the number of male hunters would have been only 25. But in 1880, there were 66 heads of families and another 20 young men who took winter debt. Assuming that the same number of people depended on male hunters in 1880 as did in 1832, the Homeguard population would have almost trebled in 45 years increasing from approximately 90 to about 250. The population was said to be continuing to increase at the rate of ten per cent per annum. Surrounded on all sides by other districts — Oxford House, Norway House, Severn and Churchill — there was no room for territorial expansion. Indeed, Fortescue said: 'Emigration is out of the question, as there is no where to go to, Norway House and Oxford are themselves over populated, and I am under orders to discourage all movement of the Indians to the former quarter.'

The combined effects of environmental deterioration, overpopulation, and Fortescue's own management strategies meant the York Factory Homeguard faced a bleak future in 1880. As he observed:

The York Factory Indians are consequently wretchedly poor, out of the lake country [the Shield uplands] with few or no fish, they depend mainly on the deer for subsistence and when these fail they starve and a starving Indian cannot hunt. They have no canoes as there is no birch south [north?] of Oxford but arrive on rafts on the breakup of the river, and watch their chance to leave in some of your boats, navigating the rivers..., which drop them along shores somewhere near their winter grounds to which they make their way across country as best they can. When here in summer they are dependent on us for their livelihood, as this season all fish have left the rivers and game gone north, until the month of September, brings both back again. Consequently, they feel more acutely the stoppage of all freight that was their food in summer and clothing in winter in former years.

Fortescue's attitude toward the plight of the Homeguard Indians is complex and may reflect an emerging point of view of the Company regarding the issue of native dependency and the responsibility for native welfare. As the foregoing observations show, Fortescue was clearly aware of the plight of the local Indian bands and of the adverse affects that his actions had. Yet, he exhibits little evidence of any feelings of moral responsibility. Fortescue apparently believed, and there certainly were precedents for the belief, that it was better to have the Indians in a dependency position such as was the case when they needed relief, than to have them operating from a position of

economic strength. Hence, it was desirable to thwart any collective labour actions designed to provide Indians with a living wage and force them instead to rely on handouts. While there does not appear to be any official Company policy on this issue, it should be pointed out that no one voiced any opposition to this strategy.

With regard to the expenses associated with the provision of relief, Fortescue offered the opinion:

... there are some expenses that ought not easily to be borne by the company at all. It is well and perhaps politic to have the same fraternal care of the Indians as formerly, but it is expensive now, and the Canadian government ought either to assume this proportion of the burden or remit ... (duties) on those sections [of Canada] still unprovided for by treaty or otherwise. This however is a matter more properly pertaining to the heads of departments, to whom belongs the arrangement of all matters involving diplomacy with the governing authorities.

From a business perspective this suggestion made good sense. When fur volumes were high, the profit margin built into the standards of trade was such that the Company could well afford to provide welfare to the Indians. By 1880 this was no longer the case in many areas and the York Factory district was a good example. If the government could be persuaded to carry the high welfare costs of poor hunting and trapping years, the Company could at least balance its books and have the prospect of realizing a tidy profit in good years. Such a subsidy program would certainly have helped Fortescue in his efforts to make York Factory district a profitable one. However, his ideas were ahead of their time and it was to be several years before this type of government assistance was available.

In conclusion, York Factory faced a severe crisis in 1880. As the headquarters and principal depot for the Northern Department for the previous sixty years it had become the largest establishment that the Hudson's Bay Company operated in the West. But, it was located in an environment that was ill-suited for such intensive development. Consequently, it severely taxed the local environment. This had not been of paramount concern until the 1870s, because the costs resulting from environmental depletion such as forest clearance and provisioning were not borne by the factory. Instead, they were charged to the department as a whole. Similarly, the costs of supporting the local Indian population were passed on as part of the general charges of the Northern Department. The imbalance in the local ecosystem became glaringly obvious after 1870 when the Hudson's Bay Company made major changes in the way it managed its business operations. Then, even with a much-reduced scale of operation and a smaller labour force, York Factory was at best a marginal operation. Not surprisingly, it continued to decline until it was closed in 1957. Long before then, however, it had ceased to be anything more than a minor trading post. ♦