

**THE MASTERS OF THE WILDERNESS: A  
STUDY OF THE HUDSON'S BAY  
COMPANY FROM ITS ORIGIN TO  
MODERN TIMES. A PAPER READ BEFORE  
THE CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY,  
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**CHARLES B. REED**

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## THE MASTERS OF THE WILDERNESS

BY

CHARLES B. REED

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The question of a Northwest Passage to India and the South Seas has stimulated the mind and kindled the imagination of mankind for four hundred years. From the very first a fascinating theory, it soon became a necessary obsession, for the fierce activities of the triumphant Turks rendered the usual routes to the Indies too perilous for commerce, and Christian nations, especially Holland and England, turned with intense eagerness to the solution of this problem. Defeated in the immediate object, their efforts nevertheless exercised an incalculable influence over the entire world. With the single exception of the cognate adventure, the search for the North Pole, it is probable that no other quest has added so immensely to those arts and industries which make for the promotion of science and the advancement of civilization. That such a passage actually existed has been recognized since the voyage of Sir Edward Parry in 1820 and the fact was confirmed by the expedition of McClure in 1857, yet the complete passage from sea to sea had never succeeded until the recent memorable voyage of Captain Amundson in 1903-06. Among the earlier navigators who received the crown of immortality through their efforts to achieve this quest, none is more meritoriously conspicuous than Henry Hudson, who in 1607 hammered his way through the ice floes to 80° north latitude. Next he thought to break through on the south, and in 1609 he discovered and explored the Chesapeake

and Delaware Bays, the harbor of New York, where he was attacked by natives, and sailed up the Hudson River as far as the present site of Albany. But the lure of the Northern route was strong upon him, and in 1610 he undertook the voyage which was at the same time the source of his greatest renown and the cause of his dreary death.

Passing through Hudson Straits, he entered the Bay which also bears his name and guided his ship cautiously southward. Sustained by an indomitable spirit, he rose superior to many difficulties and dangers, and spent over a year exploring the harbors, inlets and adjacent coasts of this great inland sea. On attempting the homeward passage, however, he found he had delayed too long, and his crew, already disaffected by reason of the long voyage and the many strange hardships, suddenly became enraged at Hudson on account of his irascible temper, and rose in mutiny on June 11, 1611. They put Hudson, his little son, and five others into a shallop with a small amount of ammunition and provisions and sailed away.

In the narrative of this expedition written by Abaccus Prickett, one of the mutineers who succeeded in reaching England after a wearisome and perilous voyage, it is told how the old man with set features and flying gray locks, grimly made sail in pursuit of his ship until he was dropped below the horizon and never seen again.

We now know only too well the barriers which lie in the path of the Northwest Passage. Almost directly northeast of the mouth of the Fish River which Lieutenants Back and Simpson both found, there lies a vast mass of ice which can neither move toward Behring Strait on account of the shallow water, nor to Baffin Bay on account of the narrowness and crookedness of the channels. We know also from the reports of the Low expedition of 1903-04, that there are two open currents always flowing in the straits that lead to Hudson Bay;

one along the northern shore inward and to the west, and one along the southern shore outward and eastward, bearing the raft ice of the Bay. These currents are so suitably disposed that by a slight change of course ships can navigate the straits and have the benefit of the current in either direction and sail with the ice floes rather than against them. We also know that Hudson Bay is simply a vast whirlpool 800 miles wide by 1,000 miles long which has been cut, grooved, and gouged out of the solid rock by those two powerful currents which bear in their puissant grasp the raft ice of the Arctic Sea, the ice of prehistoric ages.

Like a giant sand-blast these huge masses of ice have been whirled grinding and eroding around the Bay only to be disgorged through Hudson Straits upon the bosom of the broad Atlantic. Into this channel of rock, the Hudson Straits, 450 miles long, is jammed from the west, churned together and concentrated the area of an ice continent, and up this channel from the east runs a "tide-rip" thirty-five feet high. When the "tide-rip" and the ice meet there occurs what the old navigators of the Hudson's Bay Company called "the furious overfall."

One can with difficulty resist the temptation to pursue this interesting subject further, but this is not the story that we started to relate, but merely the scene of its beginning.

Impressed by the reports which various navigators brought back from this region, a company was formed for the purpose of exploiting the shores of the Bay and the wooded fastnesses of the interior. The company was organized originally at the instance of the French explorers, Radisson and his brother-in-law, Groseilliers, whose visit to the Hudson Bay country had revealed its boundless possibilities. Disappointed in enlisting an interest in the venture in Montreal, they applied to Sir George Carteret, who was then in America as a member of the Royal Commission appointed to settle a number



of disputed questions between New York and New England.

It was through his influence that they met the King in 1666, but it was only after a long delay, and some say not without insistence on the part of Louise Querouaille, the King's mistress, who was also under deep obligations to Lord Arlington, that the charter was granted by Charles II in May, 1670. Quite early in the venture the promoters had obtained audience with Prince Rupert, who with historical fieriness entered enthusiastically into the undertaking and became the first Governor of the "Honorable Hudson's Bay Company." There is an uncontradicted story to the effect that the Prince received a lump sum of £10,000 for his interest and influence in securing the charter, but we much prefer to believe that his interest was engaged and his romantic mind inflamed by the adventurous nature of the project, rather than by monetary considerations. When the Prince died he was succeeded in the governorship by the Duke of York, the King's brother, who afterward resigned to become James II of England. The Duke indeed had been associated with the adventure from the beginning and the records show that his was the first name on the stock book, while opposite the name on the credit side of the account it states: "By a share presented to him in the stock and adventure by the Governor and Company, £300." We learn that among the many subscribers to the stock were to be found the King's cousin, his brother, afterward King James, the Duke of Albermarle, General Monk, who was largely responsible for the restoration of Charles, Henry, Earl of Arlington, a member of the ruling cabal, and Anthony, Earl of Shaftsbury, the versatile minister of the King, all of whom became directors in the new undertaking.

In their application for a charter the Company had urged the desirability of such a corporation as they contemplated as a means of (1) continuing the search for

the Northwest Passage, (2) that in the progress of trade with the nations the blessings of civilization and religion should be brought to the Indians, and finally (3) that settlements could be affected to the glory of the King. We shall learn in the course of the narrative how quickly the Company lost sight of these high aims in the pursuit of a less noble purpose. The right of the King to grant such an instrument may be seriously questioned, but there was apparently no doubt in his own mind, and without evident qualms of conscience the "Merry Monarch" disposed of an expanse equal to the United States, except Alaska, "To our dear and entirely beloved cousin Prince Rupert, Count Palatine of the Rhine, Duke of Bavaria, etc. (with the others) constituting the Governor and Company of Adventurers trading into Hudson's Bay." The charter states that the incorporators deserve the privileges because they "have at their own great cost and charges undertaken an expedition for Hudson's Bay in the northwest parts of America, for a discovery of a new passage into the South Sea and for the finding of some trade for furs, minerals and other considerable commodities and by such their undertakings, have already made such discoveries as to encourage them to proceed farther in pursuance of their said design, by means whereof there may probably arise great advantage to us and our kingdom."

With truly royal generosity Charles gives "The whole trade of all those seas, streights and bays, rivers, lakes, creeks and sounds, in whatsoever latitude they shall lie within the entrance of the streights commonly called Hudson's Streights, together with all the lands, countries and territories upon the coasts and confines of the seas, streights, bays, lakes and rivers, creeks and sounds aforesaid which are not now actually possessed by any of our subjects, or by the subjects of any other Christian Prince or State."

Now the country watered by rivers flowing into Hud-

son Bay extended two hundred miles to the east, three hundred miles to the south and sixteen hundred miles to the west, although by the terms of the charter it might extend to China as men at that time undoubtedly believed. From near the western end of Lake Superior, streams find their way by Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods to Lake Winnipeg and thence by Nelson River to Hudson Bay. From southwestern Minnesota the "Red River of the North" flows into Lake Winnipeg and thence into Hudson Bay. Hither also flows the mighty Saskatchewan, which, wide as the Mississippi, draws out its lingering and serpentine course for sixteen hundred miles from its remote origin in the very heart of the Rocky Mountains to that huge collecting basin, Lake Winnipeg, where its turbulent flood first finds temporary peace. This vast extent of territory was quite commensurate with the powers and privileges conferred, for the charter also reads that the "fisheries within Hudson's Straights, the minerals including gold, silver, gems and precious stones, shall be possessed by the Company." The whole land was to be held in "free and common socage", that is, as absolute proprietors. The Company was empowered to make laws not only for its own servants, but having force over all persons upon the lands. And further, "To judge all persons belonging to said Governor or Company, or that shall live under them, in all cases civil or criminal according to the laws of this kingdom and to execute justice accordingly."

"The Company is empowered to send ships of war, men or ammunition into their plantations and appoint commanders and officers and even to issue to them their commissions."

To make peace or war with any non-Christian people.

To build forts and fortifications and, what was more to the point, they were to have "the whole and only liberty of Trade and Traffick," and free power was given to seize upon the persons of all who might attempt to violate this provision.