
CHAPTER IV

THE "LITTLE COMPANY" OF SCOTTISH TRADERS

ONE of the dominant features of the Scottish race is its independence. The right of private judgment has been greatly emphasised in the religion of Scotland. A strong individualism is the reaction from spiritual and intellectual tyranny, and this has been remarkably shown in Scotland. The late Dr. Sprott, of North Berwick, used to tell of seven religious people, in Galloway, who held a select service of their own in a farmhouse. A spectator noticed that, after a few weeks, three of the seven met in one room and four in another. One of the seven being asked the cause of this division answered: "Ah, weel, we couldna' just see eye to eye, and we thocht it better to pairt!" The world is now seeing more clearly the importance of collectivism as a reaction from such individualism. This individualism is thus seen to have been very characteristic of Scotchmen. The fur trade showed this tendency even under the new conditions of Scotsmen in America. The fur trade union was really a rope of sand, and the Company at Montreal was

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little more than a clearing-house for the partners concerned. Each had his share in the trade, and the Montreal accountants had but to make up the profits or losses of the yearly trade and divide them pro rata among the partners, most of whom were far away in the Fur Country. In 1787 there was an attempt made to centralise the business to a greater extent, but it will be remembered that dissension immediately followed. At the meeting in Grand Portage held by the traders in 1795 matters, as we have seen, assumed a critical aspect, and there was a secession, favoured by Sir Alexander Mackenzie, but from which he withheld himself for three years. Forsyth, Richardson and Co. were, however, the rallying centre of the "New North-West Company," as they wished to call themselves. They for trade purposes in 1795 were called the "X Y Company." This name arose from the practice of the old Company marking its bales "N.W.," and the new Company took X Y, which were the next letters of the alphabet. They were not, however, contractions, and should not be written so. The strong spirit of "Le Premier" McTavish, however, still dominated in the old Company, and they despisingly called their opponents "The Little Company" or "The Little Society." In the wild region of Athabasca the old Company referred to the X Y Company as the "Potties," probably a corruption of "Les Petits—"The Little Ones," meaning members of "La Petite Compagnie." This nicknaming was practised on the old Company traders themselves

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by the Hudson's Bay Company, who called their opponents "The Pedlars."

A great spirit took hold of the "Little Company," and this again stirred up the older Company. The X Y Company vigorously duplicated every fort, erecting a new building within a stone's throw of the old. In 1797 the X Ys erected a rival house at Grand Portage—the very centre of the old business. A few years later when the Nor'-Westers built Fort William on the Kaministiquia their opponents erected another within a mile's distance. At the mouth of the Souris River, where Brandon House had been built by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1794, there was, of course, the Nor'-Wester Fort, the X Y Fort, and two free traders' forts—five in all, McCracken and Jussaume, the independent traders, classing with the others.

"For three years," we are told by Ex-Governor Masson, "there was at this time an uninterrupted succession of troubles, differences, and misunderstandings between the opposing leaders—McTavish, Mackenzie, and their followers." Those who admire "good haters in a cause" might at this time be easily satisfied.

In 1799 Alexander Mackenzie declared his intention of leaving the old Company, and next year a letter was read at Grand Portage from "Le Marquis," saying: "I feel hurt at the distrust and want of confidence that appeared throughout all your deliberations last summer."

Soon after the meeting of 1800 Mackenzie

