
CHAPTER IX

SCOTSMEN IN THE "ASTOR COMPANY

JOHAN JACOB ASTOR, a German trader, of New York—the ancestor of the wealthy and celebrated family of the New York Astors of to-day—had a good eye for furs. Beginning trade in Montreal, he, after certain changes had been made in trading regulations, went to New York, but he had a liking for Canada and the fur trade which never left him. With varied success he dealt in furs in the American Fur Company at Mackinaw, and established the South-West Company and the Pacific Fur Company. But Astor with keen insight saw that the only men who could help him through with his larger enterprises were the Scottish traders of Montreal, and he had set his heart on beginning trade on the Pacific Coast at the mouth of the Columbia River.

In 1810 he proposed to the North-West Company of Montreal that they should take a one-third interest in the "Pacific Fur Company." The Nor'-Westers were, however, quietly working out in the same direction through the passes of the Rocky Mountains. They therefore declined his proposals, and immediately gave special orders to

Scotsmen in the Astor Company

David Thompson, their explorer, to push on to the Pacific by way of the Columbia River.

Astor at once saw the necessity for prompt action. The Scottish traders of Montreal were his only resource, and cost what it might he determined not to be beaten. He made offers of the most flattering kind to a number of the most active and capable men of the North-West Company. The French-Canadian boatmen he knew he could get if their Scottish leaders were available.

Astor's plan was duplex. One of his expeditions was to reach the mouth of the Columbia River on the Pacific Coast by way of Cape Horn, the other would ascend the Missouri River and by a journey of exceptional difficulty cross the Rocky Mountains and descend by a most dangerous route to the Pacific Ocean.

The Cape Horn expedition was the first to start. Four stalwart partners of the North-West Company, induced to forfeit their allegiance, entered upon the scheme with Astor, and they were all men who knew their work—moreover, they were all Scotsmen. They were Alexander McKay, Duncan McDougall, David Stuart, and Robert Stuart. They engaged their voyageurs from among the French-Canadians in Montreal, and left Montreal for New York in the highest of spirits. Highland endurance mingled with French vivacity made themselves felt. The party-masters, clerks, and "engagés" went by boat across Lake Champlain, portaged their boats into the Hudson River,

