

Orkney and the Hudson's Bay Company

By J. STORER CLOUSTON, Author of "The Lunatic at Large," "Mr. Essington in Love," "The Spy in Black," "Our Member Mr. Muttiebury," "Scots Wha Hae," "The History of Orkney," and numerous other works.

The second of three articles on the Orkney Islands and their inhabitants who played so great a part in the story of the Hudson's Bay Company. These articles were specially written for "The Beaver" by Mr. Clouston, who, besides being internationally famous for his series of popular novels, is also author of a history of the Orkneys. Mr. Clouston writes with authority, for he is an Orkneyman himself and his family has had many contacts with the Hudson's Bay Company.

(In the first instalment Mr. Clouston dealt with the main geographic features of the islands and quoted from old records to give a picture of the physical and mental qualities of the "commonalty of Orkney who built the cabins and dragged the sledges and trapped the beaver in the settlements round Hudson Bay.")

IN the first of these articles I mentioned a party of sixty-three men who left the Orkneys in 1798 for Hudson Bay. It is to be observed that this contingent of sixty-three was made up of thirty-nine men from the Mainland, sixteen from the South Isles—South Ronaldsay alone contributing half of them—and only eight from the North Isles; these last being actually confined to Rousay (seven names) and Egilsay, two islands closely adjoining the Mainland. Now, the Mainland and South Ronaldsay, and also to some degree Walls in the South Isles, and Rousay, were the strongholds of the old odal proprietors down to the early part of the eighteenth century, and in some parishes down to today. These landowners, partly of ancient Norse descent and partly sprung from Scots immigrants bearing good names, held their properties by the old Norwegian odal tenure. By this system, in its heyday, the whole descendants of the original owners possessed the estates in a kind of almost unbreakable entail. All sons had equal shares, and all daughters half shares. Daughters and younger sons frequently sold their portions to the head of the family (this was usually the case in very early days); but, even so, they remained part of an odal-born family with a very high opinion of its dignity.

Even when evil days befell the islands—a story too long to tell here—and the odal properties split up into small farms whose owners shrank into impecunious working farmers, a pretty high standard of self respect and independence was preserved, while the actual blood itself, with whatever virtues it contained, flowed on, not only in the "peerie* laird's" veins, but in those

of the tenant farmers, their cousins near and distant. Yet at the same time the prevalent poverty throughout Orkney in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, aggravated by an archaic system of runrig farming, limited the people's ideals to a mere carrying on of life as they knew it. And what they knew included little or no education, few comforts, and nothing, save perhaps a sweetheart or a Yuletide revel, that could be called a luxury.

The following passage from the Account, written this time by the Rev. John Malcolm, minister of Firth and Stenness, helps to explain a preference for the rigours of Hudson Bay to a farmer's life in Orkney.

"Ploughing after harvest is very unusual. Small as the farms are, this occasions a throng of work in the spring. Should any man be eight or ten days behind his neighbours, he will have woe enough in the harvest. How soon the oats are cut, they are hurried into the yard. All the cattle are left to their liberty, and he whose corns are unripe must cut them down, or expect to have them destroyed. By the middle of October, hunger and cold force home the half starved cattle from the hills; the hill-dykes are too weak to keep them out; and it is equally impracticable to point these invaders as to prevent their incursions. They must be hounded with dogs to the mountains, perhaps after a dozen of them have run through fields of standing corn. The hopes of any improvement, or better management, are very remote. The great number of heritors concerned in one piece of land will be found a great bar to improvements whenever they shall be attempted. In one town of land, as it is called, consisting of about sixty acres (Scots acres; 27 p.e. larger than English acres), and with eight farm houses besides cottagers' houses, eleven heritors have an interest."

So that even a farmer, let alone a cottager or a hired hand, had small expectation of bettering his position

*Peerie—little

Stromness from the south, with the old Hudson's Bay cannon in the fore ground. The cannon was fired to announce the coming of the Company's ships.



so long as he remained in that land where unripe "corns" were hurriedly cut to save them from the tramping charge of half starved cattle and little fields were held rig-about by a host of heritors, each jealously guarding his fraction.

Yet poverty and poor conditions did not prevent the Orkneyman descended from an old odal family from priding himself on his pedigree. The Rev. George Low, in a "Description" of Orkney written in 1773, speaks of the calf sometimes having "a better apartment than the heir of a family that can boast of twenty-four generations of uninterrupted lineal succession!" To illustrate the frequent combination of humble station and old landed descent: Out of the sixty-three who joined up in 1798, fully two thirds bore the names of one-time land-owning families, and fourteen of these were even numbered once among the "best landed men" found on the assizes of the sixteenth

century head courts. These labourers and sailors cannot now be traced back to any of those old families, and it may very likely have been difficult then, yet they must have sprung from them originally and inherited some infusion of their blood, if not of their acres.

It is hard to imagine better conditions for the production of a race such as the Hudson's Bay Company wanted for their spadework servants—simple, hardy, very shrewd within the limits of their knowledge, highly self respecting, and endowed, I may add, both with a sense of humour and with good humour. It is a curious thing that none of the old commentators mention these last attributes. If one has any sense of humour oneself, the keen and usually gravely expressed Orkney waggishness is one of their most marked characteristics. While, as for their good humour—their readiness to help a friend, or even a stranger—it is

still more difficult to understand how it escaped particular mention. Probably the writers were so used to it that it never struck them as noteworthy.

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The relations between the Company and their Orkney servants, and the economic effects of the association, are touched upon several times in the Old Statistical Account. Most scientifically exact and addicted to the marshalling of facts of all these old divines was the Rev. William Clouston already mentioned, a learned and dignified figure whose reputation has not even yet been forgotten in the islands. He was perhaps a trifle prosy, according to our snappier modern standards, but a perfect mine of information, garnished with once apt Latin quotations, whereby he indicated to the respectful reader how a gentleman and scholar should set about a statistical essay. It has already been seen how reliable his information was, so that one may with the less hesitation quote the passage dealing with Hudson's Bay Company.

"Hudson's Bay Company's Ships" (he heads the passage). "Hudson's Bay was discovered by Henry Hudson in 1610. France, after disputing the right to it, finally ceded it to Britain, at the Treaty of Utrecht. Since 1670, the trade to that Country has been carried out by a Company, who have an exclusive Charter. The capital of this Company, originally £10,565:12:6d. has been increased to £104,146:17:6d. This Company fits out three ships, from 150 to 400 tons each, which carry out provisions, guns, powder, shot, hatchets, cloths, etc., to be exchanged with the Indians for

beaver and other furs. These vessels usually arrive at the Harbour of Stromness about the first of June, where they stop for two or three weeks to take aboard men for their settlements. They engage usually from 60 to 100 men, natives of this county to go to these settlements, every year. They have about 400 or 500 men in these settlements, of whom it is presumed three-fourths are Orknesse, as they find them more sober and tractable than the Irish, and they engage for lower wages than either the English or Irish. The yearly wages they give is, house-carpenters, from £20 to £36; blacksmiths, from £20 to £30; sailors from £18 to £25; boat-builders, from £20 to £30; bricklayers or masons, from £20 to £25; tailors, from £10 to £15; labourers from £6 to £18. The Company raises the wages of these men in proportion to the time they remain in their service, because the longer they are, the better they are acquainted with the business, and consequently more useful.

"The Company's ships usually return to the harbour of Stromness about November, to land those men who choose to return home. The returns to the Company by these ships, from all their settlements, is usually from 80,000 to 100,000 beaver skins, or other furs equal in value to this number of beaver; for all other furs are computed by their relative value to the beaver, as are also the goods sent out from Britain; and consequently the Company's accounts with their factors in these settlements are kept in beavers, as ours are in pounds Sterling.

"It has been said by a great writer (Abbé Raynal) that the murmurs of the nation have been excited against this Company, both on account of their monopoly, and also on account of the great profits they make; which might indeed have been great some time ago, when their trade was more extensive, and not checked by the interference of the Canadian traders, and when the expence of supporting their extensive settlements was less; but, of late years, it is asserted, that they do not divide above 6 or 8 per cent, which is no more than the East India Company, and other trading companies in Britain have divided.

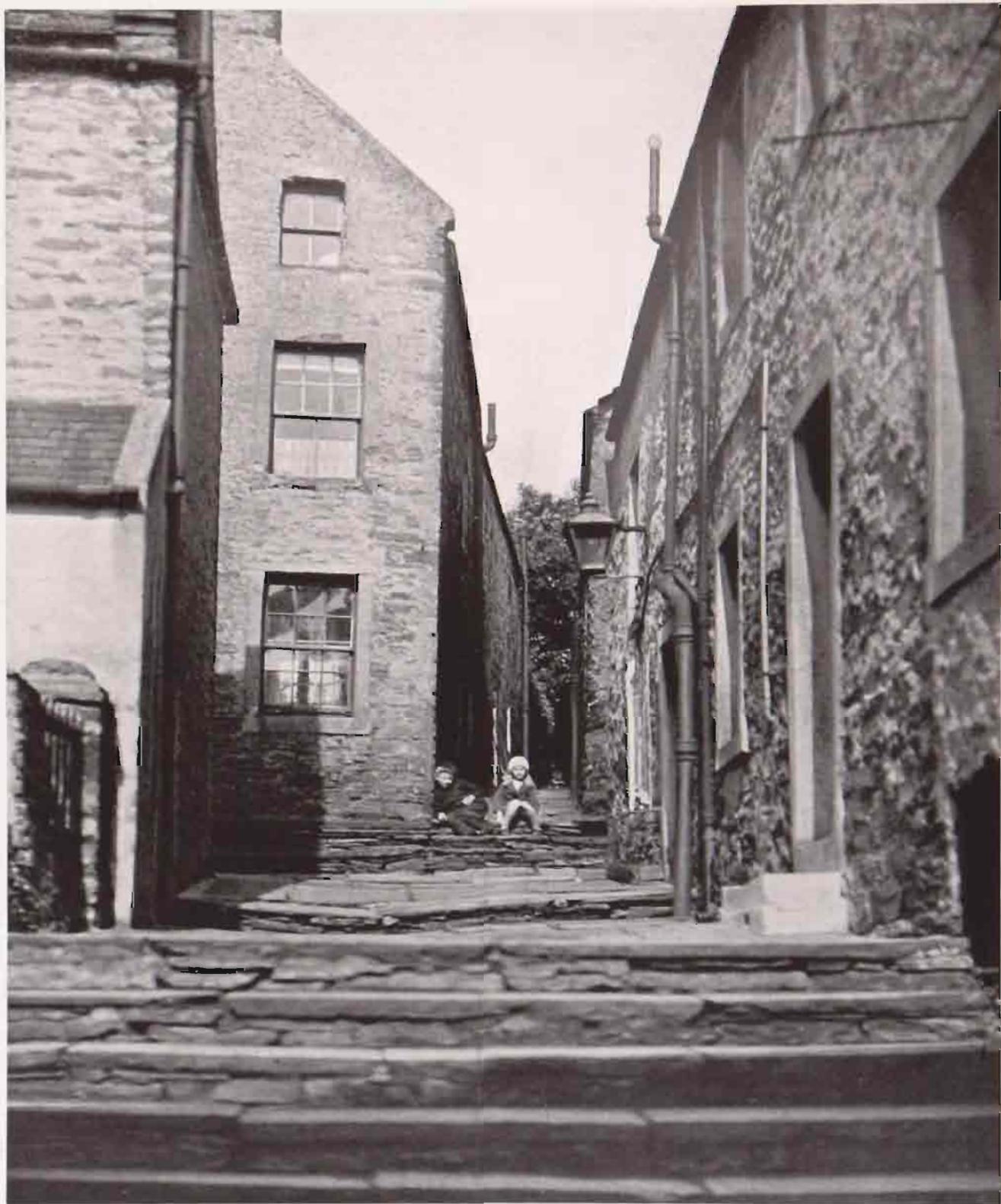
"If the murmurs of the nation have been excited because of the monopoly which this Company enjoys, so also, of late years, there have been great complaints in this county, both on account of the small wages given to the labourers, and the great number of them engaged, while the farmers are left without servants. The constant drain of men from this county to the Greenland and Iceland fisheries, the coal-trade, and His Majesty's navy, together with 200 fencibles raised, has tended to foster these complaints, which are principally directed against the Hudson's Bay Company, because they make a yearly demand, and at once, and therefore the more perceptible. We cannot complain that our men are called away to fight our wars; this we can only regret, and that the situation of things makes it necessary, occasioned by the turbulence of a neighbouring nation."

(At this point I apologize to the shades of the learned writer for omitting a sonorous quotation from Virgil.)

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The inscribed stone marking the site of a famous well in Stromness.





An old close in Stromness. Those who know old fur trade buildings such as Lower Fort Garry, built by Orkney masons, will notice the close similarity in the construction of doors and windows to those shown in this photograph.

"In time past, when there was not such a demand for men from other quarters, the number necessary for Hudson's Bay might well have been spared from this county; and although it is no doubt better for a country to keep its natives at home, provided they can be usefully employed, either in agriculture or manufactures, yet where there are not manufactures, or improvements in agriculture, thus to employ them, it is better to hire them to those who can usefully employ them; and also better, that they go to hunt the harmless and civilized beaver, than, like the Swiss, to fight the wars of other nations for hire. As to these men being idle and useless to their own country when they return, it may be observed, that several of them are perhaps so before they go there, and that this is what often induces them to go.

"Notwithstanding that those who are against this emigration, represent to those who go, 1st. The dangers to be encountered from mountains of ice in going there; 2dly. The severity of the climate, and the danger of being frost bit; 3dly. The hazard of being cut off by the Indians; yet all this does not deter them from going. But even allowing that all these dangers are exaggerated as perhaps they are, since few are frost bit except through their own inattention, or cut off by the Indians except when it is occasioned by their own imprudence; yet still their solitary situation there, might seem of itself sufficient to weigh against all the pecuniary advantages they can hope to reap in the Company's service; since they are cut off from family and friends, and from all social intercourse but with the natives, where

. . . 'immersed in furs
Lie the gross race. Nor sprightly jest, nor song,
Nor tenderness, they know; nor aught of life,
Beyond the kindred bears that stalk without.'

Notwithstanding this, too, yet from a restlessness of disposition, a desire of change, and small as the wages are, yet as they are better than the farmers here can afford to give, the Company always procure a sufficient number of men to go to that bleak climate. For their success in procuring these men, they are perhaps indebted to their agent at the village of Stromness, who is a man well qualified for business, and attentive to the interests of the Company. This agent pays away yearly for the Company from £2000 to £3000 Sterling, which no doubt greatly tends to quicken the little trade of this place."

Among other facts to be gleaned from this account, it will be seen that the number of sixty-three men who enlisted in 1798 was evidently below the average and scarcely does justice to Orkney's part in supplying the Company's personnel.

In addition to the information contained in the Account, some further particulars have been very kindly given me by the Company's secretary in London, and I should like to say here that these and all the other facts which follow later, taken from the Company's archives, are published in this article by the permission of the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, to whom I feel a very lively sense of gratitude.

It was in 1693 that we first have record of the Company's ships visiting Scotland in search of suitable servants. In that year a certain Captain Simson sailed northwards with the purpose of enlisting the services of some persons "who would serve the Company at

cheape wages." But whether this economical errand took Captain Simson as far north as Orkney is not known for certain.

Nine years later, however—in 1702—it is definitely recorded that Captain Michael Grimington, commander of the ship *Hudson's Bay*, received instructions to call at the Orkneys *en route* from the Thames to Hudson Bay, "and there to take in 10 or 12 suitable young men for servants." From this it seems as if the Orkneymen were already recognized as suitable for the job, and it would therefore appear likely that Captain Simson found what he wanted in the islands.

These would seem to have been occasional visits, but thereafter, throughout the whole period 1722-1891, the Company's ships called regularly at Stromness. So that one may say that for practically two centuries the close connection between the famous Company in London with its vast territories across the Atlantic and the remote archipelago in the North endured without a break, to their mutual great advantage.

This can safely be said now, but it would not have done to say so to the Rev. Francis Liddell, who wrote the account of the Parish of Orphir in 1797. That divine had none of the cold-blooded regard for mere facts that disfigured such worldly persons as the minister of Stromness and Sandwick. When the spirit moved him to enthuse, he let himself go as a member of an inspired calling should. "The advantages of this parish," he rhapsodizes, "are fire, water and fine women!" And to show that he meant what he said, there is quite a spicy account still extant narrating the consequences of Mr. Liddell's admiration for his housekeeper.

What he disliked, he hated with equal vigour, and the most righteously loathed among his aversions was the Hudson's Bay Company. In case they should ever tend to feel too complacent, let them attend to this denunciation:

"Many young men emigrate from hence yearly; some as sailors on board merchant vessels, who generally land in the King's service at last; although they abhor the idea of being pressed in their own country. Others, and the greatest number, enter into the service of the Hudson's Bay Company; and, instead of offering an honourable service to their King and country, or staying at home to cultivate their lands, and protect their wives, and children, and their parents, for the sum of £6 per annum, hire themselves out for slaves in a savage land, where, in the language of Scripture, they are literally employed as hewers of wood and drawers of water; or, what is a still more distinguishing badge of slavery, in dragging along large loads of timber, yoked in the team, like beasts of burden. My God! Shall man, formed in the image of his Creator, desert the human species; and, for the paltry sum of £6 a year, assume the manners and the habits of the brutes that perish? Fy be on the man, who would rather be the slave of a Company of private merchants, than enter into the fleets and armies of Great Britain, and bravely fight for his King and country, our religion, our liberties, and our laws. Many of those men, at their return, after 8 or 10 years exile, bring home with them all the vices, without any of the virtues of savages; indolence, dissipation, irreligion, and at the same time a broken constitution; and the misfortune is, that having earned a little money, (for, after a five years residence, their wages are augmented), they are enabled to overbid the honest, industrious farmer, who is inumbered with a number of (Continued on page 62

the full force of the wind and spin out several lines of silk which eventually offer enough resistance to the wind that the spiders are pulled away and go floating into space. By this method spiders have been known to be blown hundreds of miles, and they have even been caught over a mile in the air. By the first of July all had settled down to the business of spinning webs and eating.

But this would go on and on far into the night if I attempted to enlarge on any more of the insects which I saw and collected or studied, so I'll just mention a few more of the interesting forms. There were apparently very few bees but the humble bees. The arctic bumble bees are beautiful things with black, yellow, and orange stripes. They range in size from the large ones, as big as the southern species, to the tiny ones hardly as large as a honey bee. Several species were found, and they carried masses of pollen on their legs after having visited the many tundra flowers. Besides these were the butterflies. Early in July there were many brown butterflies which were soon followed by a galaxy of yellow and white butterflies. These were the most difficult insects of the tundra to catch, for at the least disturbance they would bounce into the air, be caught by the high winds, and away they would go. I regularly used my best golf language while trying to net them.

As I was in the company of Mr. A. C. Twomey, an ornithologist, I had opportunity to examine many birds for the bird lice. The birds were infested with the chewing lice which run over the body and eat the feathers and skin scales, and with mites and fleas. Apparently the sparrows were the only ones to have many fleas, while the ptarmigan were the loudest of the birds. Some of the birds, as the Labrador longspurs, Smiths longspurs, and the northern horned larks, were almost free of lice. The insect annihilating ability of birds was forcibly brought to me when I took two young northern horned lark and attempted to feed them and keep them well and fat. They ate over a half of a pint of fly maggots a day plus whatever other insects I would throw into the cage with them.

I have hardly scratched the surface of interesting things about the insects and arthropods of the north, but in closing I would like to say that during my stay and studies I was never treated so royally as I was by the people of Churchill. The hospitality of the Friendly North will always hold a warm spot in my heart.

Orkney and the Hudson's Bay Company

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small children, and who perhaps may have fallen into a temporary arrear, upon whom the unfeeling landlord has no compassion. But, behold the consequence! in a few years, from ignorance and want of industry, the emigrant, in his turn, is also reduced to poverty, and must give way to another of his own tribe. By these means, most of the farms are overrented; and this fluctuating state of things puts an effectual bar to all improvements, and surely calls aloud for reformation from every virtuous landholder. There are at present, from this parish alone, in this infernal settlement, 43 of our prime young men; and 12 more are just upon the eve of embarking: This, added to the number of seamen abroad, scarce leaves hands to

cultivate the ground, and must sooner or later depopulate the country. By those means, there are no spare hands for manufacturers; and the fishery, which, next to the kelp, ought to be the great staple of Orkney commerce, is entirely abandoned; and besides, the King's service is deprived of many hardy seamen; for the moment war is proclaimed, for fear of being pressed, they skulk away to this distant settlement."

At this point something would seem to have happened which suddenly soothed Mr. Liddell. Possibly his housekeeper smiled. Anyhow, he abruptly ends his diatribe with this surprising tribute:

"At the same time, it must be acknowledged, for the honour of the Hudson's Bay Company, that no men ever acted with more integrity, or fulfilled their agreements more honestly, than those gentlemen have uniformly done; and further, upon a representation from the present incumbent of this parish, they have been pleased to augment the wages to £10; by which means above £1000 Sterling per annum is added to the income of Orkney."

So that, after all, the Company comes not so badly out of its encounter with this eloquent gentleman.

(In the next issue Mr. Clouston will tell of those Orkney islanders who rose to commissioned rank in the Company's service.)

On Wings of Arctic Summer

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By July the young terns were hatched, and until they were ready to fly the parent birds kept up a continuous search for food, most of which was taken along the coast a mile or so away. There, gracefully treading the wind, they would dive after small minnows, often plunging like arrows from forty to fifty feet and disappearing beneath the surface of the water, only to rise instantly in a shower of spray with a small wriggling fish securely held in their small pointed bills.

In August the arctic terns, their young now fully grown, left the colonies. One by one they deserted their young and started on their southward migration. They move along the coast towards the east to the north Atlantic, where they fly across the open ocean to the shores of western Europe, then down the west coast of Africa, on across to the east Brazilian coast of South America. From these two points they continue southward down into the Antarctic. But after a few months they again become restless and begin drifting northward, following their southward migration route and eventually land at their breeding grounds in June. Thus they complete a 15,000 mile journey, the longest migratory flight of any known bird.

June is really a busy season for the birds. They no sooner arrive on their arctic breeding grounds than they start their courtship in preparation for nesting. During these early June days great activity is the predominant feature. Aerial acrobatics and the strutting of spring plumages are seen, and songs are heard on every hand. The plants suddenly come to life as if by magic. The delicate dryas, or arctic heather, fairly shoot out of the melting snowbanks and in a few days the tundras will be white with their blossoms. Their life, however, is brief, lasting but about two weeks. Others take their place in the mad succession of moving events.

Great fields of lavender coloured rhododendrons, scarlet vetches and small delicate orchids are a part of the arctic spring—a spring filled with sunshine, flowers, songs and bright feathers. The season is short, a mere gesture, and the show is over. This, then, is a far different land from the cruel north with its blizzards, intense colds, hardships, and even death, so often portrayed by writers. By the last of June all of the sandpipers, plovers, curlew, ducks, geese, phalaropes, sparrows, warblers, shorteared owls and ptarmigan have laid their eggs. The sandpipers and plovers are a curious lot. After the female lays her four eggs, the male does the greater part of the housekeeping. He incubates the eggs and then looks after the feeding of the young. All this he does without a word of protest, while the female stands aloof and watches. Likewise the male red phalarope, smaller and duller in colour than his mate, attends to the domestic duties.

Just where the bird lays her eggs seems to depend upon the individual's taste, which, in general, is the same throughout each species. The low wet tundra, with its variety of sedges, grasses and sphagnum moss, would not, in most localities, seem to bother most birds. The ground cover is but a shallow covering, never more than eighteen to twenty-four inches thick. The whole is underlaid by a heavy sheet of permanent ground ice which never thaws throughout the year. In spite of this seemingly unfavourable environment, the red-backed sandpiper is apparently quite contented to make her nest, a mere depression in the wet moss, in such a place. The young, mere patches of down on long spindly legs, are no sooner hatched than they leave the vicinity of their nest. In another six weeks they undergo a profound change. Their new down is lost for a covering of feathers. The wings develop strong primary feathers, and by the first week of August the juveniles are ready for their southward migration. The adults and young leave together, and by the end of the month the tundra has lost one of its gayest sandpipers.

The sandpipers, plovers and terns are not the only birds to nest at Churchill. Great flocks of horned larks and lapland longspurs are the first to herald the approach of a new spring there. The brightly feathered birds scatter out over the tundras to construct their nests among the rocks and mosses. The nests are well made and lined with the white winter feathers of the willow ptarmigan. Their songs in spring and early summer may gladden the heart of a naturalist, or they may surprise him, for, although he may have seen flocks numbering thousands on the prairies of western North America during fall, winter and early spring, he heard no sound except for a low tinkling chirp.

Many other species nest within a short distance of Churchill. Just four miles south of the townsite the coniferous forest staggers out over the tundra in small stands of weather-beaten trees. This affords the protection required for the nesting of such birds as black-poll warblers, yellow warblers, Harris's sparrows, fox sparrows and gray-cheeked thrushes. These birds' nests are all well constructed and built in the sheltering branches of the spruce trees or on the ground where the lower branches of the conifers afford an excellent roof. Spring in the forest edge and in the forest is quite as fascinating as the avian activity of the tundras. Here even the song of the robin can be heard at