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978-1-108-07089-8 - Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857:

And of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858: Volume 2

Henry Youle Hind

Excerpt

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THE
ASSINNIBOINE & SASKATCHEWAN EXPLORING EXPEDITION
OF 1858
CONTINUED

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

LAKE WINNIPEG.—RED RIVER TO THE LITTLE SASKATCHEWAN.

Mouth of Red River.—Aurora.—Weather Signs.—Channel at the Mouth of Red River.—Storm.—Character of the South Coast of Lake Winnipeg.—Fresh-water Shells.—New Land.—West Coast.—Confervæ.—The Willow Islands.—Clay Cliffs.—Good Land.—Drunken River.—Aurora.—Rock Exposure.—Deer Island.—Section on Deer Island. Equivalent of the Chazy Formation.—Fishing Ground.—Miskena.—Grindstone Point.—Rev. Mr. Brooking.—Rocks at Grindstone Point.—The Little Grindstone Point.—East Coast of Lake Winnipeg.—Punk Island.—Yellow Ochre.—Coast near Dog's Head.—Limestone Cave Point.—Fissured Rocks.—Jack Fish River.—Fisher Bay.—The Cat Head.—Little Saskatchewan Bay.—East Coast of Lake Winnipeg.—Dimensions of Lake Winnipeg.—Elevation and Distance of the Lake Superior Watershed.—Elevation of the Mississippi Watershed.

THE early period of the year during which the arrival of winter may be expected to close the navigation of the lakes and rivers of Rupert's Land, makes every autumnal day valuable for continuing an exploration in canoes or batteaux. A fortnight, however, after our return from

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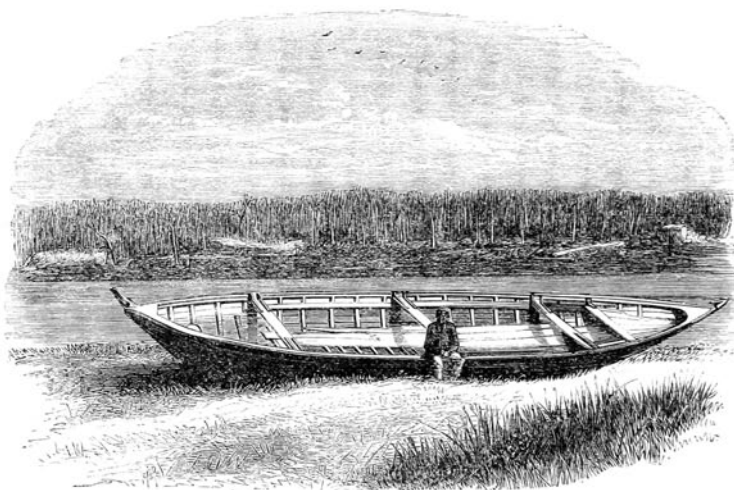
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the prairies was necessarily occupied at what may be appropriately termed Selkirk Settlement, in writing reports and making preparations for a voyage through Lake Winnipeg, the Little Saskatchewan River, and Lake Manitobah to the Salt Region on the shores of Winnipegosis Lake. Mr. Dickinson prepared for an exploration of the country between the Lake of the Woods and Red River, and between the Assiniboine and the 49th parallel. Both parties were ready by the 18th, and at noon started on their respective routes.



Freighter's Boat.

In a Red River freighter's boat of four tons' burden, with a crew of seven men, and accompanied by Mr. Fleming, I reached a point about seven miles below the Indian Settlement, being aided by a fair wind, and camped at dusk. On the following morning, the temperature of the air at sunrise was 63°, of the river, 59°. We arrived at the mouth of the river at 10 A.M., and hastened to avail

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WEATHER SIGNS.

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ourselves of a south-east wind just beginning to rise. Last night the aurora was very beautiful, and extended far beyond the zenith, leading the voyageurs to predict a windy day. The notion prevails with them that when the aurora is low, the following day will be calm; when high, stormy. The temperature of the mouth of the river was 59° , and of the open lake, $1\frac{1}{2}$ mile from shore, $58\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$. Rain commenced as soon as we were fairly in Lake Winnipeg *, the wind suddenly chopped round to the north, driving a dense fog before it, and in a few minutes enveloped us in a misty shower. The steersman instantly turned about and made for the mouth of the river, there being no harbour nearer than the Willow Islands, at least fifteen miles distant. The breeze rapidly increased to a gale as we regained calm water inside the bar at the mouth of Red River.

The wind subsided about 2 P.M., and a shot heard from a direction due south of where we lay, induced some of the voyageurs to exclaim, that the wind would soon come from that direction, according to an impression common among these excellent observers and interpreters of "signs," that a shot heard against the wind is a good omen. But our steersman placed more faith in the aurora, and thought we had not "taken all the wind out of it yet." The sky having a threatening appearance, we determined to camp.

There are six mouths to Red River, winding through extensive marshes; the channel through which we passed was the main outlet; its breadth varies from twenty to twenty-eight feet, and on either side shelves rapidly from four to eighteen feet of water. At 3 P.M., when just on

Winnipeg, from the Ojibway—*He*, dirty; and *nepe*, water.

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the point of starting, one of the voyageurs suggested that we should wait for a few minutes longer as he had observed the water of the lake coming in at the mouth of the river, and thought that the wind would soon blow strong from the north, although at the time the sky was clear and a calm prevailed. In less than half an hour a fresh northerly breeze sprang up, scud appeared drifting before it, and the waters of the lake flowed rapidly up the river into the vast marshes which extend for many miles inland at the southern extremity of Lake Winnipeg. The weather at this season of the year is very changeable, and renders boat navigation of the lake rather hazardous. In anticipation of a storm, we made ourselves as comfortable as circumstances would permit on a low spit of sand, with the lake before us, the river on our left hand, and interminable marshes east and south of us.

Soon after sunset, the breeze from the north rose into a gale; the water of the lake ran like a rapid up the river channel into the swamps, and a terrific swell soon set in from the lake, breaking upon the sandy beach with a stunning noise. The water rose to within six inches of the level of the spit on which our tent was pitched and threatened every instant to submerge it. At 10 P.M., the gale was at its height, and as we sat upon a stranded trunk of a tree, looking out upon the lake, a truly magnificent scene lay before us. Huge crested breakers covered the lake as far as we could see through the gloom, lighting up the coast with long glistening streaks of white foam. The noise was so overpowering that we had great difficulty in hearing one another speak; the waves broke over the narrow spit which formed the low bank of the river where our boat was moored and the

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SOUTH COAST OF LAKE WINNIPEG.

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tent pitched; our camp ground was reduced to a strip of sand eight yards broad and seven inches above the river on one side, with overflowing swamps on the other; if the storm had continued half an hour longer we should have been compelled to take to the boat and drift into the reeds, at the risk of being stranded when the gale subsided and the water retired from the marshes into the lake.



Beach of Lake Winnipeg, near the Mouths of Red River.

For many miles the south coast of Lake Winnipeg consists of alternate strips of sand sustaining willows, and narrow, reedy marshes running parallel to the coast line. Some of these sand strips show many years of duration when well protected by drift timber, others are of recent origin, clean and bare, enclosing ponds in which rushes are only just beginning to show themselves. They are the records of the progress made by new land in its invasion

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of the lake at and near the mouths of Red River. A northerly gale throws up a bar or beach about one hundred yards from the main shore; on the new beach drifted timber accumulates, and in process of time becomes consolidated by the gravel and sand which is washed between the logs. Willows soon grow on the new soil thus formed, and bind the whole into a firm beach with a marsh in the rear. A heavy gale may sweep the new land away or throw up another beach about one hundred yards in advance of it, on which the process of consolidation is renewed. For ages past this work of construction and destruction has been greatly in favour of the former. Hence it arises that, with the exception of the newly formed spit at the mouth of the river, there is no accessible camping ground for several miles up the stream; marshes surround the spits or old beaches on which the willows grow, and extend in all directions as far as the eye can reach.

The beach and marshes contain an infinite number of fresh-water shells belonging to the genera *Helix*, *Bulimus*, *Succinea*, *Pupa*, *Planorbis*, *Lymneus*, &c. &c. For many hundred yards together the beach is covered with perfect or disintegrated forms of these shells, thrown up by the waves upon the sand.

We employed ourselves during our unexpected detention in examining the coast, sounding the river, and in shooting and fishing. Our sporting brought us only six duck, three plover, and three large pike. The flesh of the pike was of a delicate salmon colour, more like that of the salmon trout of the Canadian lakes than of the common pike.

Sept. 21st.—Rising at 4 A. M. in half an hour we were *en route*, the morning just beginning to dawn; temperature

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THE WILLOW ISLANDS.

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of the air at sunrise, 51°, of lake 59°. The west coast for a few miles is elevated from five to six feet above the lake; here and there a low beach of limestone gravel, sand, and a few granite boulders, is fringed with a belt of tall aspens which grow within twenty feet of the water's edge. Behind the belt of aspens is a marsh, then another belt of aspens also followed by a marsh. This succession continues for a distance of about three miles before good land supporting heavy aspens is to be found in large areas. Near to the spot where we breakfasted, an excellent illustration of the prevailing character of the west coast, thus far, occurs. A sandy beach covered with shingle had separated a former bay from the main body of the lake. On this beach, which was not twenty feet broad, or more than five above the lake level, willows, dogwood, and grasses were growing; a large pond lay inside, fringed with rushes; it was tenanted by hosts of duck. In the rear of this pond a narrow strip of land clothed with aspen, separated a marsh from it, which had doubtless once been a bay of the lake, then a pond, and finally a marsh.

At 11 A. M., a vast quantity of *confervæ* appeared in clusters on the surface of the lake, resembling in every particular a similar organism noticed in extraordinary profusion on the Lake of the Woods in August, 1857. The sudden appearance of this "weed," indicated a calm, according to the experience of our voyageurs. A calm did occur for a short time, soon, however, followed by rain in the north, which fortunately did not reach us.

Inland ponds cut off from the lake by low beaches appear as far as the Willow Islands, where we arrived in the afternoon. These islands were found to consist of a few small sandy areas and one long narrow strip of sand

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and gravel, stretching into the lake in an easterly direction, and separated from the shore by a narrow channel. They are fast wearing away, and in the memory of some of the voyageurs, were covered ten years since with willows, poplar, and a few spruce. They have probably afforded much of the material for the formation of the beaches which have cut off portions of the lake on the southwest coast, the sand and shingle being drifted along the shore by the long waves which every breeze from the north or a northerly direction creates. The depth of water near the coast is very small; soundings showed twenty-nine feet of water one mile north of Willow Island, the deepest part yet observed. Near Willow Island we met an Indian in a canoe with his wife and two children: he was going to Red River. I gave him some tobacco and his squaw a small quantity of tea; in return he unrolled a piece of birch bark and handed me the moufle of a moose, at the same time remarking that he was a conjuror and would "make us a fair wind." The steersman replied that a fair wind for us would be adverse to him. "Ah," said the conjuror, "but I will make one for you and two for myself."

In the afternoon I landed to examine some cliffs of clay which appear about twenty-three miles from the mouth of the river. They were sixteen feet in altitude, and exposed a clean surface of stratified marl, reposing on a brownish-black clay. The stratification was in thin horizontal layers, easily detached one from the other. The brownish-black clay showed a very tenacious character, so much so, that it was very difficult to break off with the hand masses larger than ten or twelve cubic inches, in any other direction than that of the plane of stratification. It was worn by the action of the waves