

Adventurers

HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY ~ THE EPIC STORY

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and images from Hudson's Bay Company's Corporate Art Collection



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HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

The Adventurer

1660–1720

September 1668. Four months out from London, the small trading ketch *Nonsuch* noses into the mouth of the Rupert River. By the mast stands a Frenchman who pays no attention to the swirl of English voices around him. Instead he scans the shore with an expert's eye. It is a harsh-looking place, this flat, thinly treed land at the bottom of James Bay. But for Médard Chouart, Sieur des Groseilliers on that September day in 1668, it represents a dream come true.

Seven years before, des Groseilliers, as he is known, and his brother-in-law, Pierre-Esprit Radisson, had travelled to the north of Lake Superior, farther inland than any Frenchmen before them. When winter froze the lakes and streams, they had settled in among their Cree and Ojibwa trading partners to await the spring.

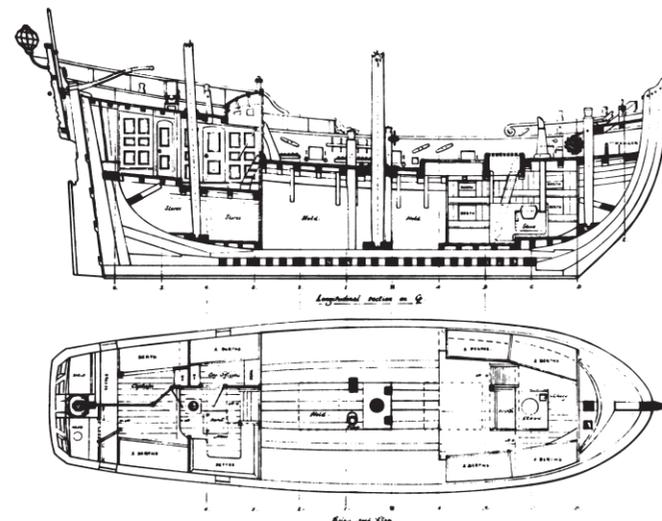
Times were hard, their native hosts told them. Once, traders from the powerful Huron confederacy on the Great Lakes to the south had brought them French kettles, hatchets and blankets and traded for beaver pelts. Then, ten years back, the fall of the Huron nation to its great rival, the Iroquois confederacy, had cut off the northern peoples from the flow of French trade goods. The war still rages, and almost nothing gets through.

Give us another route, the Cree and Ojibwa said. Stay away from the fighting on the Great Lakes.

Des Groseilliers repeated their words when he and Radisson returned to Montreal. If we go by sea to the great salt bay to the north, he explained, we can get around the conflicts to the south. We will trade directly with the hunters of the cold northern regions where the best pelts come from. But New France did not welcome des Groseilliers' plan. Even in wartime,

the fur trade was Montreal's biggest business. The merchants there would never allow it to be diverted to Hudson Bay.

Undaunted, des Groseilliers and Radisson went elsewhere. By 1665 they were in England, and in 1668 des Groseilliers sailed to Hudson Bay.



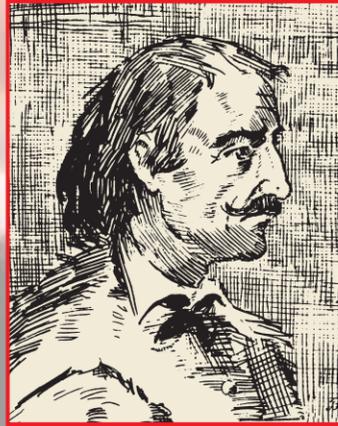
(Opposite) The *Nonsuch* battles heavy seas on its way to Hudson Bay. A cramped fifty-three feet (sixteen metres) long, the *Nonsuch* was packed with hundreds of trade goods, including pounds of tobacco and dozens of pairs of shoes, as well as a crew of eleven men.



The Voyageurs Radisson and des Groseilliers

In France, Médard Chouart's family had owned a piece of land called "des groseilliers," the gooseberry patch. Owing land had prestige, so young Médard added the title "des Groseilliers" to his name. (Much later, Hudson's Bay Company records would list him as "Mister Gooseberry.") He came to New France when he was about twenty-one and lived for a time at Trois-Rivières. But he never settled for long on any patch of land. Instead he spent most of his life travelling, trading, and exploring with his Native allies and friends. He pioneered the *voyageur* way of life in New France — and helped father the North American fur trade.

Pierre Radisson was a recent teenage arrival in New France when he was captured by Iroquois raiders. Several years with them — and suffering torture when he tried to escape — made him a tough, experienced woodsman who spoke several Native languages. Soon after he was freed, his new brother-in-law, des Groseilliers, took him along on the great voyage to the northwest. Later, in England, it was Radisson who took the lead in dealing with the London merchants and investors.



(Above) Radisson and des Groseilliers greet their Native trading partners by the shore of Hudson Bay. (Left) Pierre-Esprit Radisson was the brother-in-law of des Groseilliers.



At the Rupert River, Captain Zachariah Gillam and his crew beached the *Nonsuch* and built a snug shelter. Des Groseilliers waited with them through a long, cold, quiet winter.

Spring arrived, and Cree traders came down the river. Their canoes rode low in the water, for they were heaped with glossy beaver pelts. They greeted the winterers and exchanged gifts with them. An alliance was struck, and business soon grew brisk. By mid-June,

the Cree traders were heading back to their inland homes, their canoes laden with kettles, hatchets, blankets and other goods. The *Nonsuch*, her hold crammed with beaver pelts, set sail for London.

Des Groseilliers was jubilant. Traders living in the snowy encampments of the Canadian north had forged a bond with the great merchant houses of Europe. They had turned the fur trade of North America toward the once almost deserted shores of Hudson Bay.



(Above) It was the beaver and its valuable pelt that drew Radisson and des Groseilliers to Hudson Bay. Many early illustrations of beavers and their ways were done by artists who had never actually seen them. (Left) This 1777 engraving shows beavers living in apartment-style colonies.



(Top) With a full cargo of furs, the *Nonsuch* returned to England in the fall of 1669. Radisson and des Groseilliers had succeeded in establishing a trading route to the rich fur country of the north. Their first winter had been spent near the mouth of the Rupert River (left). In later years, the Company would concentrate its trading at York Factory, at the mouth of the Hayes River on the west side of Hudson Bay.



For Want of a Hat

As odd as it seems, it was a fashion for hats that drew the Company to Hudson Bay.

In the seventeenth century, everyone of style and note wanted a beaver hat. But this was not some furry headgear — when people spoke of a beaver hat, they actually meant one made of felt from the undercoat of the beaver’s pelt. Once sheared from the pelt, this fine dense fur, consisting of thousands of short barbed hairs, could be pressed into a glossy felt that was waterproof and could easily be worked into many different styles. Such hats were precious — a man might leave one to his son in his will — and Europe soon developed a thriving used-beaver-hat industry.

The style for beaver hats lasted well into the nineteenth century, when silk overtook it in popularity. By that time, the beaver was prized for its fur, not just its felt.

(Top left) Beaver hats enjoyed a long-lived popularity and came in many styles. (Above) Today, the beaver hat has passed into history. This selection from a costume shop in London, England, is used in historical plays and films.

The English investors who had sent des Groseilliers and the *Nonsuch* to Hudson Bay were powerful people. They included the leading court bankers and the most successful shipowners of London. The King of England himself, Charles II, was interested. These men were not thinking merely of a business in furs. They had seen the East India Company build a trading empire in Asia, and they hoped North America could provide opportunities to match. Once the *Nonsuch*’s voyage proved that a fur trade out of Hudson Bay was practical, des Groseilliers’ plan became the inspiration for a great enterprise.

Under the leadership of Prince Rupert, who was an artist, a soldier and a scientist as well as King Charles’ “dear and entirely beloved cousin,” some of the wealthiest and best-connected men in England pooled their money to found a new company. At Whitehall Palace in London, on May 2, 1670, Charles II of England authorized a Royal Charter that created “The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson’s Bay.” Thus Hudson’s Bay Company, the world’s oldest continuing trading company, was born.



(Above) Charles II of England signs the Royal Charter creating the “Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson’s Bay” on May 2, 1670. (Right) Today, the Charter, which features a portrait of the king worked into the letter C in his name, is kept at the Company’s head office in Toronto.



Prince Rupert (1619–1682)

The Prince, properly called Prince Rupert of the Rhine, was a first cousin of Charles II of England and spent most of his life serving the Stuart kings. He was Charles II’s finest cavalry commander, a brilliant admiral, and also an artist, a chemist and a patron of the arts and sciences. Rupert never

visited North America, but he gave his name to Rupert’s Land, which covered almost half the continent.

King Charles’ Charter promised the founders of the new company that they could be “true and absolute Lordes and Proprietors of Rupert’s Land” — all the land drained by all the rivers flowing into Hudson Bay. They did not know it yet, but Rupert’s Land covered forty percent of modern Canada. Its boundaries stretched from what is now Quebec to Alberta, north into today’s Northwest Territories, south into what is now the United States. Within that territory, King Charles authorized the Company to build forts, raise armies, wage wars, found colonies, enforce laws and drive out all competitors. King Charles had created a company with an empire larger than Europe.



The Discoverer of Hudson Bay

Henry Hudson, the man who gave his name to the great bay — and the Company named for it — was a seasoned explorer. Hudson had already made two attempts to find a North West Passage and had journeyed up the Hudson River when he was commissioned by James I of England in 1610 to search for the passage from Europe to China. The lavishly equipped expedition made its way into Ungava Bay and through the treacherous strait that would later bear Hudson's name. Once his ship was again in open water, Hudson mistakenly assumed that he had found the passage — only to be faced with the shorelines of the bay as he headed first east, then west. Trapped in the bay, Hudson and his men spent a miserable winter waiting for their ship to break free of the ice. In June, the sick and hungry sailors mutinied when Hudson refused to give up exploring. They abandoned Captain Hudson, his son and a few loyal sailors, and sailed home to England. Interestingly, while the corporate name is Hudson's Bay Company, the name given on most maps today is Hudson Bay. The letter S was officially dropped early last century.



(Above) Henry Hudson and his loyal crewmen were set adrift by mutinous seamen in the bay that bears his name. (Left) On this seventeenth-century map, Hudson Bay is called Hudsons.

Once the glamour of its founding faded a little, the “Company of Adventurers” set itself to the kind of trading des Groseilliers and the *Nonsuch* had begun at Rupert River in 1668. Soon the Company was sending more ships to Hudson Bay, starting an annual cycle that would last two hundred years.

The Company's men opened trading posts at the mouths of rivers all around Hudson Bay. They put up storehouses. They ran up the Company flag. They built alliances with bands of Cree traders who came to greet them. The pattern for the Company's success was set, although the gentlemen in London would have to wait a few years before they were happily counting any profits.

The Native nations, too, must have been satisfied.

King Charles' men might have a parchment giving them all of Rupert's Land, but the Cree — and their Ojibwa, Montagnais, and Assiniboine allies — knew to whom the land and its trade really belonged. Now they could come down the Rupert River, the Moose River, the Albany River or the Eastmain River to James Bay, or down the Severn River or the Hayes River to the western shore of Hudson Bay. At each place there was a new, permanently occupied Hudson's Bay Company outpost. Kettles, axes and other trade goods began to flow once more to northern peoples who had been cut off from them by the fierce wars on the Great Lakes. Native traders carried the business far into the west, and each spring more canoes came downriver to the Company posts.

Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville (1661–1706)

The son of a prosperous Montreal merchant, Pierre Le Moyne earned a reputation as one of the greatest fighting soldiers and sailors in the history of New France. D'Iberville, to use his title, proved his bravery in 1697 during a battle to capture York Factory. Challenged by a British force of three armed ships, his lone vessel sank one British ship, chased off another and forced a third to surrender. After four hours of fighting, York Factory was his. He went on to fight the English in New York, Acadia, Newfoundland and the West Indies.



If the Company traders did not give “good measure,” however, Cree traders went elsewhere. New France had not abandoned the fur trade when des Groseilliers brought the English to Hudson Bay. The wars with the Iroquois were ending, and Montreal traders were once again venturing westward. They were eager to beat these interlopers from the great bay to the north. To win that battle, they would use muskets

and cannons as readily as trade bales. The Company's shareholders were about to learn that New France had woodland fighters as intrepid as its woodland traders.

When des Groseilliers and Radisson went to London, France and England were allies, not enemies. In any case, the two fur traders' true loyalties, it seems, were not to any nation but to the fur trade itself. Gradually they found the Company had not much to offer them. They were veteran woodsmen, eager to take the trade far inland, but the clerks and warehouse keepers the Company sent to Hudson Bay stayed close to their storehouses and stuck to business. Cree traders did the inland travelling and trading. In 1684 des Groseilliers and Radisson went back to New France. Radisson would eventually return to Hudson's Bay Company service, and he died in London about 1710. Des Groseilliers, the founder of an international trading network that connected the woodland traders of northern Canada to the merchant houses of London, died peacefully at home in Trois-Rivières about 1696.

A wigwam belonging to what were called “Home Indians,” Cree who lived near Hudson's Bay Company posts and acted as middlemen in the fur trade.

