THE COMPANY DIVERSIFIES

Loggers at Moose Factory

By David R. Dyck

In the summer of 1809 the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company sent Alexander Christie to Moose Factory as "Surveyor of Woods." He was to see to the cutting and squaring of such "Timber Trees as may be adapted to the Trade of this Country." To assist him in this endeavour, Mr. Christie was authorized to engage four men from Aberdeen, near his own home town of Pettendrith and these men together with additional servants the Company would put at his disposal were to open up a new business venture. The Company was going into the timber business.

The timber business was one of a number of efforts the Company was making to broaden its source of income at a difficult time in the fur market. The Napoleonic wars were very inhibiting of trade between England and its traditional continental trading partners. Nowhere is this more forcefully stated than in a long letter to the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury sent by the Company on 21 December 1808. In this letter the Company claimed severe financial distress because all the *good* furs of the last three years, normally sold on the European markets, were still in their warehouses. Normally, only beaver pelts and some few inferior furs were bought for use in Britain. Fine furs were bought by merchants from Europe for the fairs of Frankfurt and Leipzig, and for France. Since 1806 no furs had been sold for exportation because no buyers had come. Whether this was because of French or British governmental policies, the end result was the same. In their letter, the Company requested relief from duties on unsold goods and a loan, on the grounds that it supported British manufacturing, many British citizens, at home and abroad, and thousands of natives in Canada. The Treasury Commissioners granted only a one-year delay in payment of duties. In response to this the Governor and Committee resolved to embark on a series of belt tightening measures.

More hopefully than that, however, the governing Committee began to look for ways to expand business in other areas. In a letter to Thomas Thomas, Superintendent of the Southern District, the Committee asked for extensive detailed information about a vein of lead located at White River. The request included providing a careful description of the vein, its surrounding rock formations, the possibilities of road or navigation to the location, the "practicability of conveying the ore on a railway" together with samples of the ore. Further ideas included the making of potash for shipment to England, and the growing of hemp for rope making. There is no clear indication how far these ideas were pursued, but the lumber business was supported vigorously. Indeed in the year that Alexander Christie was first sent out, 1809, John Thomas, Chief at Moose Factory, was told that ". . . for the present . . . suspend in great measure the prosecution of it [the fur trade, except for beaver]", and that he was to give Christie every assistance in his power ". . . to enable him [Christie] to prosecute the very essential object we have in view [developing the timber trade] which we must for the present consider is the most important object of the Factory under your Command".

Just how serious the Company was about the timber business can be seen from the fact they offered Alexander Christie £500 for the period of about May 1809 to September 1810. This at a time when labourers were getting £20 per year from that same Company, and highly skilled employees were considered to be well paid at £30. They further gave Christie discretion in picking four men to work with him, at a maximum of £50 each, and instructed David Geddes, their agent in Stromness, to hire 10 extra Company servants who were capable of cutting, felling and squaring timber and send them to Moose Factory in case Christie might be able to make use of them.

There was, to be sure, a certain amount of lumbering going on before the arrival of Christie. This was mostly done when there was time, and when there was need. Most factories in the Southern District had a sawpit or two and timber was being sawed by some of the men throughout the winter. But the products were used for local buildings, constructing and repairing boats used in the trade, and occasionally sending some timber back to England, when the ships would otherwise not be full. So when Christie arrived at Moose in the

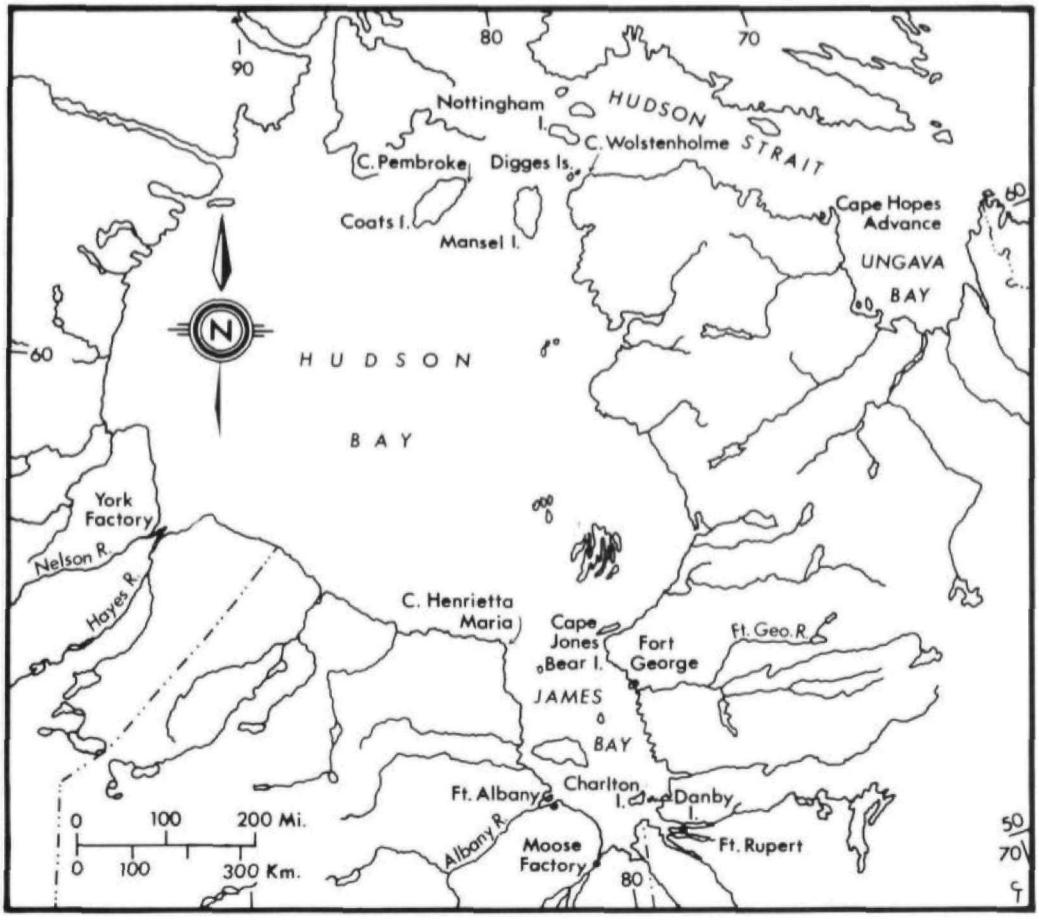
fall of 1809, he immediately made a quick survey of the surrounding woods, and sent a report together with timber samples, such as were available from the previous winter, back to London with the returning ship.

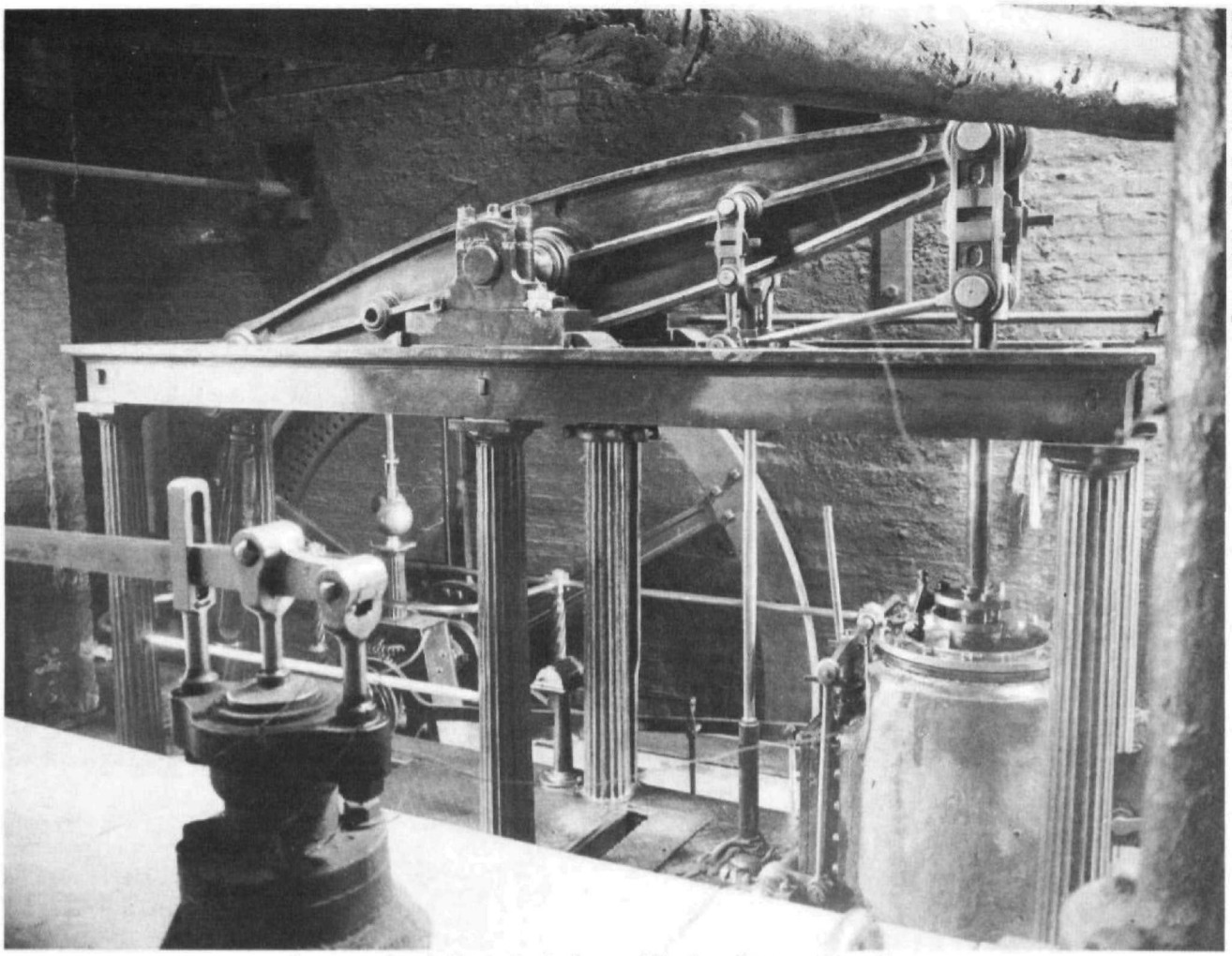
In this preliminary report Christie laid out the nature of the commitments necessary to expand the timber operation. Most immediately he needed two horses to haul logs to the river bank (they were sent out in the summer of 1810), but for greater expansion of business, Christie raised the possibility of building a sawmill powered by a steam engine. In the immediate period, however, he and the men who came for that purpose were busy cutting trees, squaring and sawing them into suitable timber for export to England.

Christie determined to return to England in the fall of 1810 for detailed discussions with the governing Committee about the future of the timber business. He felt comfortable about the work continuing in his absence because sufficient timber had been cut and squared so that the men could concentrate on pit-sawing in 1810-11, and because he left very detailed instructions with the Chief of Moose Factory, John Thomas, about the exact dimensions of the timber to be produced.

The timber was being prepared for sale in London in four categories: battens, deals, masts and spars. Battens, cut out of the best wood, were always 2¾ inches thick, and ranged from 16 to 20 feet long and 6 to 9 inches wide. Deals, which constituted the bulk of the timber shipments, could be from 2 to 3½ inches thick in half-inch increments, anywhere from 8 to 20 feet long, and from 8 to 11 inches wide. At one point the governing Committee requested a very restrictive range of deal sizes, at a time when the deals were being mostly sold to box manufacturers. Generally, however, that request seems to have been largely ignored. Spars and masts were governed by a complex formula, devised by His Majesty's Navy, relating thickness to length, and defining how and where on the individual spar or mast the measurements were to be made.

When Christie returned to London late in 1810, he met with the Committee to discuss the potential of the timber trade. In the course of these discussions it was understood that expansion was possible and desirable, and that Christie would return to his home and put his thoughts and proposals together and send them to the Committee. When he did so, on 19 February 1811, the Committee was so shocked by the proposal to send





George Watkins Collection, University of Bath

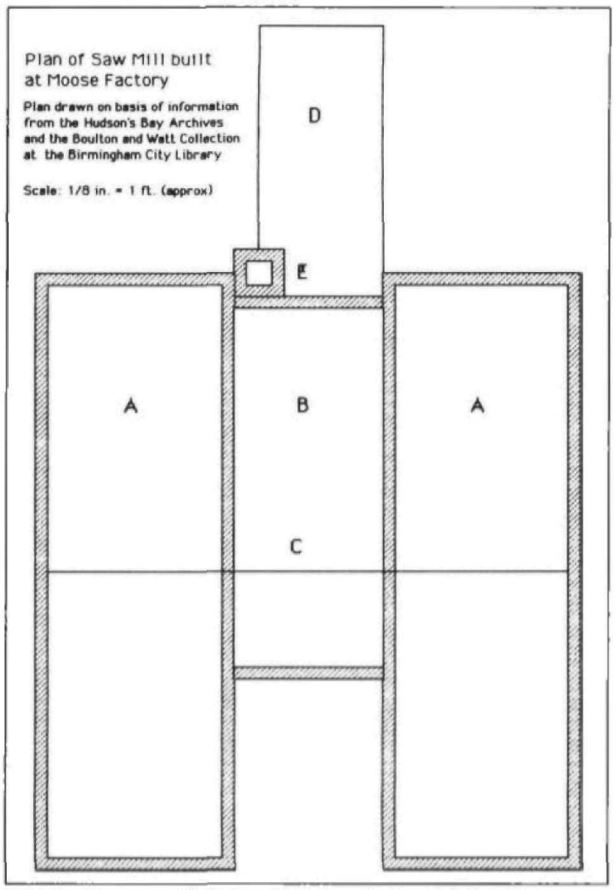
A steam engine similar to the Boulton and Watt installation at Moose Factory.

52 men to prepare as much as 468,000 feet of deals, that they seriously considered abandoning the business completely. Clearly, Christie had not hinted at such a large labour force in the earlier discussions. They requested that he come to London for further discussions, the end result of which was the Committee's decision to provide Christie with a sawmill and a steam engine to operate it, at or near Moose Factory. The decision is an interesting one. A case could be made that sending out men who could be brought back fairly quickly should hostilities cease, would have been a more sensible proposal than spending approximately £2,700 on equipment that would likely remain in Canada. Nonetheless, it is likely that the Committee was unwilling to build the buildings and provide the large establishment necessary to support the work force Christie envisioned.

The Committee having made its decision, it was then firmly committed to it for the secretary wrote to Christie on 27 March 1811, saying "The Committee expects you will immediately come to London if the proposal meets you approbation and if not you will please inform me by return of Post that the Committee may have time to look out for another person to superintend the Business". A month later implementation of the proposal was proceeding with specifications being forwarded to James Abernathy's foundry in Aberdeen, to begin the construction of sawmill equipment. The engine was to be ordered from Boulton and Watt's Soho Engine Works in Birmingham. By this time, James Watt, the originator of the separate condenser engine, had retired from the firm as had Matthew Boulton, but the Engine Works continued in the capable hands of M. R. Boulton and James Watt, Jr. Initially, the Company intended to order a 10 horse-

A Timber Glossary

Batten: Long, narrow piece of squared timber.
Deal: Piece of sawn fir or pine wood of standard size.



(A) Saw houses — 16 feet by 50 feet and about 46 feet high. (B) Engine house — "exactly" 12 feet wide by 32 feet long and about 48 feet high from bottom of flywheel. (C) Line of power transmission. (D) Boiler and firebox — 10 feet by 32 feet and about 14½ feet high. (E) Chimney — about 4½ feet square at the base and about 45 feet high.

power steam engine. Presumably, the discussions between Christie and Boulton and Watt caused an upward revision, since the engine shipped was, in fact, a 20 horsepower engine.

The ships going to Hudson Bay in the summer of 1811 carried, along with the usual supplies, Alexander Christie with a mandate to set up a station on Hayes Island up the Moose River from Moose Factory, a sawmill which had been prepared by James Abernathy and Sons, and letters to the Northern and Southern superintendents which authorized Christie to get supplies and men, up to 20, from other factories. Christie was expected to build his station and raise cattle and provisions, but he could draw on supplies from Moose when necessary. It was also decided to separate Christie's accounts from others and treat the lumber business as a separate operation. This was largely a result of the difficulty that the factor at Moose had in justifying the sad state of his accounts when, in truth, Christie was constantly drawing supplies from Moose and using their tradesmen, such as the blacksmiths, armourers and others.

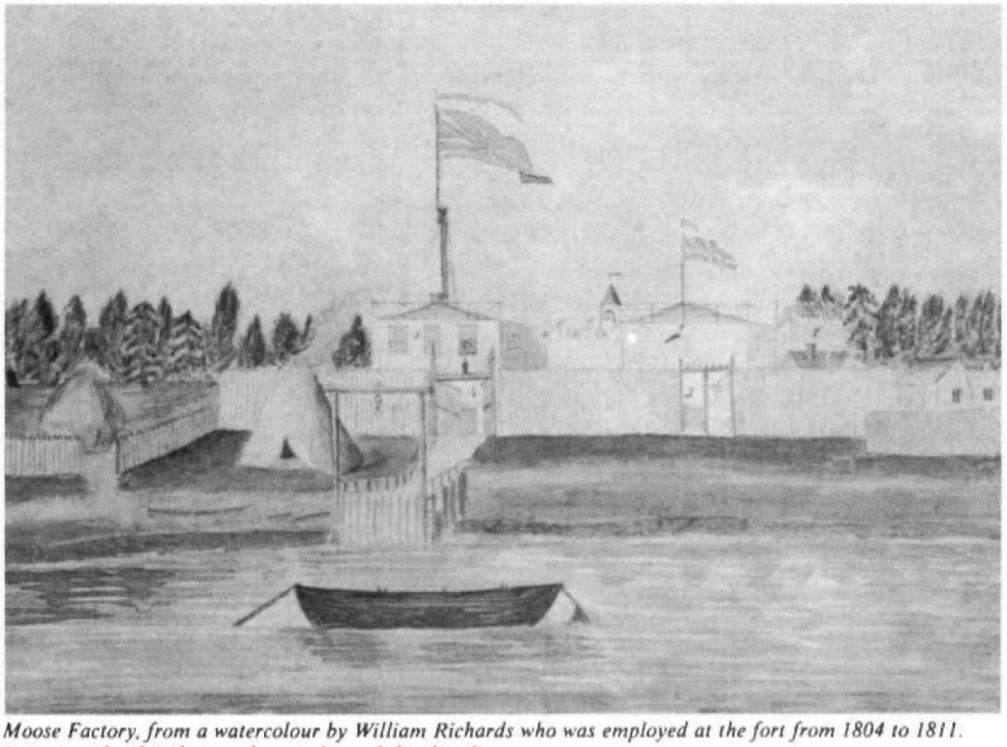
During the winter of 1811-12, Christie was very busy "prosecuting" the timber business on several fronts. Timber for shipment was, of course, still being prepared in the sawpits. But during that same winter, he was constantly employing a variety of tradesmen from Moose including the blacksmith with his assistant, the bricklayer, the carpenter, the millwright and the armourer. All these men were kept busy beginning both the construction of buildings and the preparation of ironwork for the sawmill.

In May of 1812, Christie sent a letter to London by way of Canada, suggesting that it might be possible to use water wheels as motive power for the sawmill. By the time the letter was presented to the governing Committee, the intended steam engine was crated and awaiting shipment that summer. Christie was told he could try water wheels, and if they worked, then he was to send back the steam engine. In the event, however, Christie had realized that water wheels would not work due to ". . . the Force of the Ice and Floods at its breaking up and . . . by the defficiency of Water through the middle of the Summer".

The steam engine arrived in the fall of 1812, the shipment consisting of "82 pieces and 12 boxes". However, what was not included was an invoice listing all necessary parts, nor a man to assemble the engine. In a letter from Boulton and Watt Company, dated 29 February 1812, the Company was reminded that they had agreed to find a man for erecting the engine and send him to the Soho works for familiarization. This had not yet happened and time was running out. Clearly, it was not done in time.

While the governing Committee was busy, during the year 1812-13, finding a suitable engineer, Christie and the tradesmen from Moose Factory were kept busy preparing for the eventual installation of the engine. Fortunately, Christie had a drawing of a 20 horsepower Boulton and Watt engine, which they were using as a basis for the preparatory work. In a letter sent with the returning ships in the fall of 1812, Christie emphasized that any engineer hired to come out to Moose had to work with Boulton and Watt and make certain that nothing was missing, ". . . as no assistance whatever can be had in this Country/such as Castings, & etc.". Even bolts or screws, if over one inch in diameter, could not be repaired at Moose.

By the summer of 1813, the governing Committee had finally found an engineer, John Pickard, who was sent out to Moose for the next year. However, there were already some signs of difficulty for the timber business, even while Pickard began to erect the steam engine. The armistice between England, Russia and Prussia had drastically lowered the cost of timber in England. But, as the war was continuing elsewhere on the continent and in light of preferential duties applied to goods coming from the Colonies, it seemed as though



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Moose Factory, from a watercolour by William Richards who was employed at the fort from 1804 to 1811. Large stands of timber can be seen beyond the shoreline.

the production of deals would continue to be worthwhile. Christie was encouraged to concentrate on them.

After a winter's exertion by Pickard, along with frequent assistance from the Moose blacksmith, the steam engine was ". . . put in Motion for the first time" on 30 July 1814, five years after Christie had first been hired to "survey" the woods near Moose Factory. At about this same time the governing Committee was sending Norwegian timber workers, who were to work on piece rates rather than fixed yearly wages. They were also to be given garden plots and a place to live, but would have to buy any European provisions they needed. "The men will thus have a strong motive for economy as well as industry." Clearly, the Company was anxious to cut back on the costs in the timber business. Indeed, with the example of the Norwegians they hoped to force more of the other servants to operate on the same basis, especially in the timber business.

In its annual letter, written on 25 May 1814, the Committee expected a general peace in Europe in the near future. This likely would have an effect on wood prices. But, the advantages of an exemption from duty on wood coming from its North American lands, together with the advantage it hoped for from switching to piece work, ". . . afford a hope that it [the timber business] may be carried on to a profit".

Although the engine was running in July and John Pickard the engineer returned to England in the fall of 1814, the timber business continued to have problems. For one thing, it appears that not all necessary parts had in fact been brought, as the steam engine only operated one-half of the mill during the winter of 1814-15. More parts were sent out with the ships in the summer of 1815. Meanwhile, another problem arose. The engine had continued working until frost set in. Then, ". . . the frozen Earth, which adhered to the sides of the building below the surface had so much power as to shift the whole body of the Engine House and caused them a great deal of trouble to bring back to its former levels". In order to prevent a further occurrence in the future, Christie prepared a deep drainage ditch around the building, filling it up with dry sand and stones. Finally, it should be noted that the journals were regularly reporting the need for more work on the engine. Clearly, the operation was not without its frustrations.

The Committee was very anxious to recoup some of its expenses and in several summers sent extra ships to bring a cargo of timber. The return of ships from the Bay was always a race with the weather and ice, and in 1815 the ship from Moose Factory, including the extra timber ship, did not get out of the Bay and had to winter over.

In spite of this and in spite of ". . . the return of Peace in Europe", the Committee was still indicating in its annual letter of May 1816, that white deals would ". . . maintain as good a Price or better" than those from the Baltic or other sources. They were confident enough of their position that they were sending another extra ship out in the summer of 1816. Once again the

ships could not get away in the fall and had to winter over. The second decade of the nineteenth century was one of extreme cold. It is, therefore, not surprising that the ships were frequently trapped in the Bay.

Whether Alexander Christie could no longer overcome his frustrations with the steam engine and shipping, or whether he could simply see no way of making the timber business into a major profit making venture, he felt it was time to call a halt. He wrote to the Committee in November 1816, in a letter sent by way of Canada, that it was time to put ". . . a stop to the Timber Trade or at least . . . materially confine it . . ." supporting this position with calculations about the business.

In reply in May 1817, the Committee accepted Christie's recommendations:

> . . . it [the Timber Trade] was undertaken as you know, chiefly as an experiment during the check which was given to the more important concerns of the Company & on the return of Peace, and the reviving activity of their more valuable Trade, it was natural to suppose that had it ever been more prosperous it could hardly continue to be an object of great Attention.

The Committee was certain of the wisdom of this decision, since the most recent deals that Christie had sent had sold for considerably less than he had allowed in his calculations.

It is interesting to note that the Committee gave a variety of reasons for discontinuing the extensive sawmill operation. Besides the fact that the war had ended, the timber prices were going down, and the view that it was a failed experiment, another reason was given in a letter to Thomas Vincent, Superintendent of the Southern District. In this letter of 14 May 1817 the Committee explained:

> The establishment of the Timber Trade was intended principally to provide Home Cargoes for Ships which might have carried out Colonists, that object being suspended for the present. We direct the Establishment to be reduced to what may be necessary to prepare such a quantity of Deals as may be required to complete the loading of the Regular Ships. No Deals but the very best quality should be ship'd, the others will serve for Factory use.

Whether the reason given here was the most significant, the events certainly fit. The working party for the Selkirk settlers came on Hudson's Bay Company ships in 1811, with the first main party of settlers wintering at York Factory and moving south in the spring of 1812. The last group of Selkirk settlers came out in 1815.

Regardless, the Committee agreed to drastically reduce the size of the establishment at the sawmill. Christie was to be offered a situation in the Company service that he was ". . . competent to fill and disposed to undertake." The Company had treated Christie well throughout the period since he first came into their employ in the spring of 1809. They gave him a great deal of latitude in making decisions about the sawmill operation. To assist in these decisions, the Company displayed an attitude usually foreign to it, and provided Christie with a great deal of information about selling prices and prospects. Christie had also been allowed the choice between a per annum salary of £300, or a piece rate, whichever was to Christie's advantage. Now, however, with his leaving, the mill was to be superintended by Christie's deputy, Mr. D. R. Stewart, but at a lower rate of pay. Reflecting the diminished significance of the mill, he was to be paid a salary of £80 per annum and ⅓ of the profit from the mill's operation. (This latter was not likely to be large.) The Company justified what it considered to be its relative generosity to Mr. Stewart because of the value of the equipment, and not on the "importance of the business".

The mill continued in operation for a time and some deals were sent to England when there was room in the ships at least as late as 1828 when the price of deals sold is still being listed in the Committee minutes. But the mill, steam engine, and employees no longer figured as a major item in correspondence or accounts. As the Committee concluded in its letter of 7 May 1817, to Christie, the mill and engine ". . . have been attended with a heavy expense, & I fear will never produce any adequate advantage" Indeed, the 1844 journal of the Reverend George Barnley, a Wesleyan missionary, records on 23 February "We passed the ruins of the old Steam Saw Mill, long since deserted, as a losing speculation . . .". ♦

David R. Dyck is Professor of History at the University of Winnipeg. Professor Dyck writes: "Preliminary research has indicated that by 1827 the steam engine was considered "Unproductive Property". Further, it appears that the steam engine and sawmill were dismantled and returned to England in 1835. A new sawmill, again steam engine driven, was erected at Moose Factory in 1883."