

Hind and Palliser expeditions: 1857-1860



C.W. Jefferys, *Palliser and Hector Explore West*
(National Archives of Canada)

<http://www.nelson.com/nelson/school/discovery/images/evenimag/18151867/palisser.gif>

In the early 1850s, a group of powerful Canada West businessmen suggested that the Hudson's Bay Company owed it to British North Americans, Native and non-Native, to open up the west to settlement and trade. Scientific expeditions were planned to determine the west's suitability for farming by drawing on the newly invented and exact sciences of geology and meteorology. Together the Palliser and the Hind expeditions of 1856 and 1857 dramatically changes the way the "frozen desert" of the northwest was imagined and eventually developed by the people of central Canada.

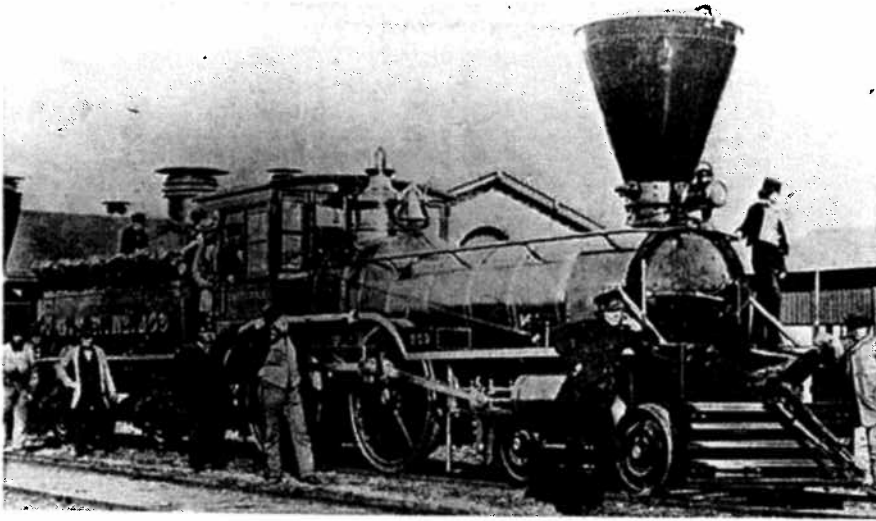
Overview of the decade: 1855-1864

Economic developments

In a 20-year period, the population of Canada West (Ontario) grew from 237,000 in 1831 to 952,000 in 1851. Montreal and Toronto emerged as major industrializing centres, and many towns in Ontario developed increasingly complex economies of agriculture, trade and logging. In Canada East (Lower Canada), population increases put pressure on the amount of land available for farming. For cultural and political reasons, the search for more land remained within that French speaking province. People continued to move from the overcrowded St. Lawrence region to the Eastern Townships and new communities further north.

Many powerful citizens of Canada West believed that the continued economic and population growth required westward expansion. There would be room for the growing population to take up land and start farms. These new farmers

would not only solve the problems of land shortages, but also provide crops for the cities of central Canada and purchase goods produced in Ontario and Quebec, increasing revenues flowing back to central Canada.



Grand Trunk locomotive at Montreal, 1859, intended for the Canadian visit of the Prince of Wales
(National Archives of Canada, C-5164; ID #20702)

<http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/20702.htm>

While pressures on Ontario lands made the west an attractive place for British and Anglophone settlement, a technology was being perfected that overcame the problem of distance that had, a generation earlier, prevented regular transportation of goods or people into the west. Between 1852 and 1867, about 132,000 km of track and 100 million dollars were put into railways in British North America. Montreal, where the headquarters of the Grand Trunk railway was located, became a centre of industry and finance. Railroads made possible the national dream of continent-wide trade. In 1863, a group of London bankers took over the Hudson's Bay Company control of Rupert's Land, signalling the decline of both the fur trade and the Company's interest in the land. The discovery of gold in the Fraser River in 1858, and the subsequent rush to the new western colony, provided another incentive to business people and railway owners to look to the vast area of Rupert's Land.

The railway made the biggest impact on the country, and was one of the largest employers for decades. Other inventions, however, were transforming traditional patterns of work and increasing production and profits while they reduced skills and wages for a variety of workers. The sewing machine, for example, was invented in the early 1850s, and within a decade it had affected the shoe and clothing industries of central Canada.

Social developments

In the 1850s and 1860s, urban societies in Canada East, Canada West and the Maritimes were becoming more complex. Wealthy and educated members of that society showed increased interest in new sciences, such as geology and meteorology (the study of weather). As frontier conditions eased in rural areas, more people participated in a growing number of community based social and political concerns, including agricultural institutes, public schools and voluntary organizations that cared for the poor or disadvantaged.

Conditions in the northwest were very different. During the centuries when the Hudson's Bay Company was the primary European presence in the extensive lands of the North West, western lands had been perceived by most British North Americans as a frozen wasteland, suitable only for fur bearing animals and the Aboriginal peoples who hunted them. The Hudson's Bay Company was happy to support this view of the west. They knew that settlement might disrupt trade relations with Aboriginal people, or disturb the habitat of the profitable fur-bearing creatures of the regions. As profits from furs declined and central Canadians began looking west, more people disputed this "wilderness" view of the west. Agricultural settlements like Selkirk, along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, seemed to prove that Europeans could farm in this region.

Political developments

Since Britain had economically distanced itself from British North America by instituting free trade in 1843, the colonies sought new trade alliances with the United States. In the years 1855-66, British North America had a reciprocity treaty with the United States (a trade agreement where goods could be traded across borders without taxes being applied). Although British North Americans sought out trade with the United States, they feared American desires to expand their territories, particularly into the vast area of the northwest. Canadian settlement of the northwest was seen as an important strategy for preventing American expansion. When the United States gave notice that reciprocity, or free trade, would end in 1866, British North Americans began to look to each other to form a new political and trade alliance. By 1867, this vision had played an important role in the Confederation of Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick. By the early 1850s, the Canadian Expansionist Movement had also begun to turn its collective eyes westward—to the Hudson's Bay lands to the north and west.

Blackfoot Plains Indians with horse and travois, used to transport tepees, food and goods across the grasslands (National Archives of Canada, C-26182; ID #10042)

<http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/10042.htm>



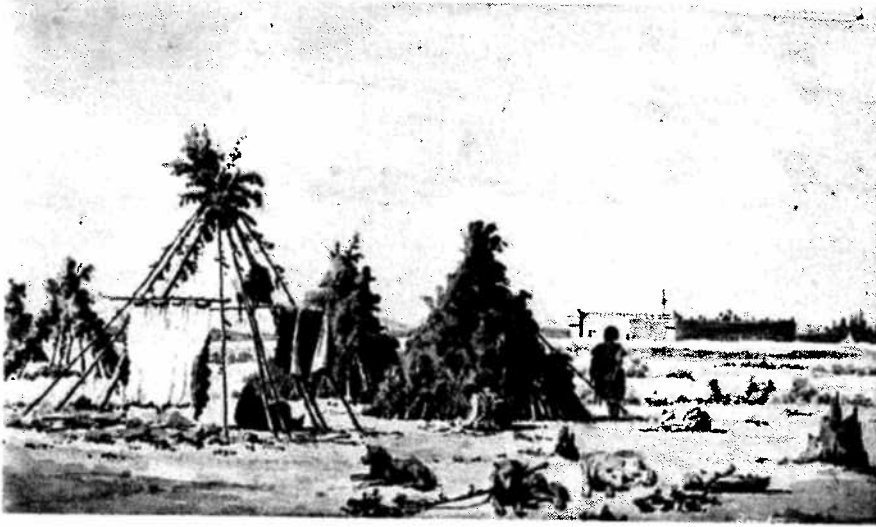
1857-1860: Palliser and Hind expeditions

The expeditions

Henry Youle Hind, a professor at the University of Toronto, was chosen to head an expedition organized by the Canadian government. He was well known in Canadian scientific circles for his work in chemistry and geology, and was recommended for the post by the Head of the Canadian Geological Survey, Sir William Logan. This Canadian expedition was the only one to set out in the late 1850s. The British Government was also interested in investigating what was still its territory. In 1857 the British sent out an expedition, proposed by the Royal Geographic Society under the leadership of Captain John Palliser. Unlike Hind, Palliser lacked any scientific qualifications for the job, but he had enjoyed hunting buffalo on a trip to the American west some years previously and looked forward to repeating this adventure.

These two expeditions were the direct result of the Expansionist's campaign to explore the potential of the North West. Unlike others who had travelled throughout the North West, Palliser and Hind were actively looking for land that was suitable for cultivation. Scientists had discovered in the 1840s that climate could not be judged by latitude alone, which would have disqualified the North West for consideration as an agricultural region. Other factors, like the distance from large bodies of water and altitude, were discovered as factors affecting climate.

In the detailed reports published by the expeditions, British North Americans could read about the newly discovered suitability of the North West for farming. Because cultivation was seen as the foundation of civilization, the detailed and scientific calculations of the Hind and Palliser expeditions seemed to prove that western expansion could and should be undertaken. The reports divided the North West into three areas: the fertile belt, 'Palliser's triangle' and a northern cold zone. Within this new mapping of the North West, the Red River settlement was not an oasis in a desert of non-agricultural land, but the eastern edge of a fertile body of land stretching to the Rocky Mountains and north to Edmonton.



Paul Kane, *Cree or Assiniboine teepees in front of Rocky Mountain Fort in Alberta, 1848* (Watercolour)
(National Archives of Canada, C-114374; ID #23255)

<http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/23255.htm>

Effects of the expeditions

These findings of the expeditions fuelled the idea that millions of acres of farmable land in the west were waiting for settlers to turn it into rich and productive farmland. Increasing pressure was put on the Canadian government to make sure that Canadians, not Americans, would be doing the cultivating. In 1869, two years after the Confederation of central Canada with the Maritime provinces, the Hudson's Bay Company transferred Rupert's Land to Canada for 300,000 pounds (\$1.5 million) and one-twentieth the lands of the fertile belt. British financiers had purchased the Hudson's Bay Company for 1.5 million pounds in 1863. Their sales on remaining lands eventually netted \$120 million, or a profit of over 15 times their 1863 investment.

The Palliser and Hind expeditions painted a view of the North West as a fertile area ready for settlement. This view fitted well with the goals of expansion by Protestant Ontario. The Hind and Palliser expeditions had not only confirmed the suitability of the North West for farming, but in the process supported a view that saw farming as a superior economic activity to the hunting and gathering activities of the Aboriginal populations. They were part of a move to claim that the North West was an extension of an English Canadian empire and not the native lands of Aboriginal peoples. As the *Toronto Globe* reported in November 1869, "it is altogether too much of a joke to think of a handful of people barring the way to the onward progress of British Institutions and British people on the pretence that the whole wide continent is theirs."

Because the Palliser and Hind expeditions contributed to the opening up of the Canadian west for English and Protestant settlement, they share responsibility for the harmful effects that this settlement had on the Native and Metis populations. So too, the expeditions are partly responsible for the devastating effects that settlement brought to the peoples, many of them recent eastern European immigrants, who settled the prairies in the decades to come. Palliser and Hind travelled extensively only in the southern regions of the Prairies, and their generalizations about rainfall and temperatures did not hold up for the northern regions where settlement was also encouraged. Their faulty science led thousands of would-be farmers to attempt to farm unsuitable lands. Not only were families broken financially and physically by trying to live on inappropriate lands, but their attempts at farming damaged the fragile ecosystems of the prairies. The dry farming techniques of shallow plowing encouraged by the Canadian government in the first decades of the twentieth century led in large part to the dust bowl of the 1930s, when most of the valuable topsoil blew away.

If the Palliser and Hind expeditions take the blame for the unsuitable development of the Prairies and the destruction of the traditional patterns of Aboriginal peoples on the Prairies, then they must also receive praise for what Prairie settlement created for some Canadians. Business people in Ontario benefited considerably from their western Empire, especially as wheat production boomed after the completion of the railway. Many farms in the region were successful, providing a livelihood for the thousands of immigrants who would begin to move into the prairies from 1872 on.