

James Cantley

(1896-1969)

On August 7, 1969, at the age of 73, James Cantley died, and with his passing was stilled a soft and gentle voice. He was a modest man, but he had a vast knowledge and wealth of experience in a lifetime of association with northern Canada, most of it dealing with an era long past.

Some 56 years ago in the summer of 1913 a young Scotsman from Aberdeen, not yet out of his teens, stepped ashore at Cartwright, Labrador, off the *Pelican*, the last of the Hudson's Bay Company's sailing ships. This was "Jim" Cantley.

During his early years fur trading in Arctic Canada by small boats and dog teams he travelled extensively through the eastern Arctic. He carried out exploratory work on the east coast of Baffin Island in search of promising locations for Hudson's Bay Company trading posts. He established in 1914 the first post at Ward Inlet, Frobisher Bay, some 40 miles from the present site of the community which has now become the main centre for the eastern Arctic. This was at a period when truly Arctic posts designed specifically to trade with the Eskimos for white foxes were being opened in the Arctic. Only five years earlier, in 1909, Ralph Parsons with whom "Jim" Cantley worked closely over the years and who was to become the last Fur Trade Commissioner, established the first Arctic post at the western end of Hudson Strait, where Henry Hudson had called in 1610 for fresh water. This was Wolstenholme and ships of the Hudson's Bay Company had passed here for almost 240 years before "The Adventurers of England" turned their eyes north to the Arctic or white fox trade.

By the turn of the century the market value of white foxes had advanced to a level that made the operation of Arctic trading posts a commercial possibility. This development was at a time when the whaling industry was on the way out. So, measured against the background of the history of the fur

trade, Arctic or tundra trading is of recent origin. It belongs to the 20th century. Jim Cantley was one of the pioneers in opening up this Arctic fur trade. Up until the close of World War II, white fox was the principal commodity exchanged by the Eskimos for food, utensils and equipment from the south.

In 1921 Jim Cantley was transferred south and appointed District Accountant and later Assistant District Manager of the Hudson's Bay Company's eastern operations with headquarters first at St. John's, Newfoundland and later at Montreal. In 1930 he moved to Winnipeg as Assistant Fur Trade Commissioner and during the next eight years he made numerous trips throughout the Northwest Territories and the northern parts of all the provinces from coast to coast.

He left the Hudson's Bay Company in 1938 and the following year organized and, for the next ten years, managed the Baffin Trading Company Limited which was engaged in trading and transportation in the eastern Arctic.

In 1950 he joined the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (then Resources and Development). Part of his work was to carry out a survey of economic conditions in the Arctic. This he did and in the course of his northern travels he covered most of the important centres in both the eastern and western Arctic and prepared reports which led to the developing of certain northern policies of specific concern for the future of the Eskimo people.

For health reasons he retired from the Department in 1956. In 1957 he was appointed a Fellow of the Arctic Institute of North America and around that time he helped set up and was the Director of the Ottawa office of the Institute. With the closing of this office, Jim Cantley continued his association with the north in one way and another, corresponding with many people who were doing northern research. He also served the Arctic Circle Club for many years as one of the auditors.

A. Stevenson

Published for the Arctic Institute of North America by McGill-Queen's University Press,
Montreal

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Indexed in the Canadian Periodical Index

Authorized as Third Class — Book Rate Canada Post Office

Printed in Canada